THE MEADOW-BROOK GIRLS ACROSS COUNTRY

JANET ALDRIDGE

Roy Mendenhall

THE MEADOW-BROOK GIRLS

By Janet Aldridge

There was never a dull moment when the Meadow-Brook Girls were together on their vacations. Whether they were camping under canvas, hiking across the country, or sailing out to sea, the five girls and their guardian, Miss Elting, never lacked excitement and adventure.

Not all their adventures were happy ones, however, and there were times when the girls' courage and resourcefulness were tested to the utmost.

The thrilling experiences that the girls enjoyed are vividly told in the MEADOW-BROOK GIRLS SERIES.

The girls made camp and ate supper.

The Meadow-Brook Girls Across Country

OR

The Young Pathfinders on a Summer Hike

By

JANET ALDRIDGE

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The Meadow-Brook Girls Across Country

CHAPTER I

A NIGHT OF EXCITEMENT

"OH, where can Crazy Jane be?" wailed Margery Brown.

"It isn't so much a question of where Jane may be as where we ourselves are, Buster," answered Harriet Burrell, laughingly. "However, if she doesn't come, why, we will make the best of it. This will not be the first time we have spent the night out of doors."

"Are we lost?" gasped Hazel Holland.

"It looks very much as though we had gone astray," replied Miss Elting, who was acting as guardian and chaperon to the Meadow-Brook Girls.

"Oh, thave me!" wailed Grace Thompson, her impish little face appearing to grow several degrees smaller.

"Girls! Please do not become excited," urged the guardian. "There is no cause for

alarm. Even if we have lost our way we shall find it again on the morrow. Harriet, you have the map. Suppose we examine it again and see if we can find out where we are. We surely must be near human habitation, and the country is so open that really getting lost is quite impossible."

Harriet Burrell unslung the pack that she carried over her shoulder, then felt about in it until she found that for which she was looking. She spread the map out on the ground at one side of the road, her companions gathering about and gazing down over her shoulder. Miss Elting sat down beside the map.

"Here! Trace our day's route with the pencil," she said. "This should be Harmon's Valley. That being the case, the village of Harmon should be not more than a mile farther on."

"There is no village anywhere near us, according to the route we have traveled since this morning," answered Harriet.

"Oh, that can't be possible," exclaimed Miss Elting.

"Please look for yourself, Miss Elting," Harriet replied earnestly. "After leaving Granite Mountain we swung to the left as you will see by the line I have marked."

"Hm-m-m," murmured the guardian as she scanned the map.

"It looks to me very much as though we had taken the wrong valley," said Harriet, as she paused in her scrutiny of the map to glance up at the hills that shut in the valley where they now were. "See! There isn't a town marked on this map anywhere in this valley."

"I believe you are right. In order to get to our stopping place for the night we shall have to cross those hills to the right. How far is it across?"

"Five miles," answered Harriet, after making some brief measurements.

"Five mileth?" wailed Grace. "Oh, thave me!"

"Tommy, will you be quiet?" begged Margery. "You make me nervous. Miss Elting, you aren't going on, to-night, are you? I simply can't walk another mile. My feet are so numb that I can't feel them."

"I can feel mine. They are ath big ath elephantth," declared Tommy.

"What do you say, girls? Shall we go on or make camp for the night?" questioned the guardian. "Remember, Jane McCarthy is no doubt waiting with her car for us over in the other valley. She will not know where to go if we do not get in touch with her to-night."

Grace, Hazel and Margery begged Miss Elting to go no farther. They already had made

ten miles that day, which they declared was quite enough.

"What do you say, Harriet?" asked Miss Elting.

"Of course I am a little footsore, but I could walk another ten miles if necessary. However, the other girls do not wish to go farther, so I vote with them to remain here for the night. But won't Jane be puzzled where to go in the morning?"

"She will find us, my dear," smiled the guardian.

"If you think best I will cross the ridge, after supper, and see if I can find her," suggested Harriet Burrell.

"No. I could not think of permitting you to do that, Harriet. Jane will be sure to wait at the meeting place we agreed upon until noon to-morrow before starting on to the next stopping place."

"But we haven't any plathe to thleep," protested the lisping Tommy. "I can't thleep on the ground, can I?"

"No. You are going to sleep standing up like a horse," answered Margery petulantly.

"No, I'm not. I'm going to lie down jutht like I alwayth do," lisped the little girl.

"Girls, stop your disputing, We have other things to think of," rebuked Harriet. "Let's

try to make the best of our unpleasant situation."

Miss Elting, shading her eyes with her hand, gazed inquiringly at the surrounding country. It was barren of buildings except for a large barn and a number of stacks and sheds, some distance away in a field to the west. Still beyond this was a clump of trees and bushes. There was nothing else—no house, no human beings other than themselves in sight.

"Girls, let's investigate that miniature forest over yonder," called the guardian. "It looks as though it might be an excellent place in which to cook supper, provided we are able to find water."

"Supper!" cried the girls in chorus. They realized all at once that they were hungry. With one accord they snatched up their packs, heavy as they were, slung them over their shoulders and laboriously climbed the roadside fence. Tommy caught her foot on the top rail in attempting to jump to the ground on the other side.

"Look out!" warned Miss Elting sharply.

"Thave me!" wailed the lisping Tommy and sprawled on all fours on the other side of the fence, kicking frantically as she fell.

"Are you hurt, dear?" cried Harriet, springing over to her companion.

"Hurt? I gueth I am. Don't you thee, I've thkinned my nothe. Oh, I withh I were home!"

"No, you don't. Think what a lot of fun you are having," comforted Harriet. "There! You are all right now."

"Am I all right?"

"Of course you are."

"All right, if you thay tho," nodded Tommy, gathering up her pack and moving away with Harriet Burrell's arm about her. Miss Elting and the other girls had started for the clump of trees. Arriving, they quickly flung down their packs. The guardian began hunting for water. She found a stream of cold water just inside the clump of trees beyond the field, as she had anticipated. The greenness of the foliage about the spot had told her that water was near. In other parts of the valley the leaves were turning. There was a strong suggestion of Autumn in the air, which at night was crisp and bracing, though the days thus far on their long tramp, had been unusually warm for so late in the Fall.

It was Harriet's duty to build the fire. She went about this task at once. There was some difficulty in finding wood that would burn. After searching she found some pieces of old fence rails. These were of pine, and as they were too long for a fire over which to cook food,

Harriet got out her hatchet and began to chop them into smaller pieces. It was a hard task to chop through a rail, sharp though the hatchet was. However, within fifteen minutes, the girl had accomplished the task and the fire was burning.

"I am afraid I can't promise a great variety or quantity of edibles for supper," announced Miss Elting, "though what there is to eat will be appetizing."

"If there is enough, it will answer," Margery declared.

"Enough?" repeated Tommy wisely. "Buthter, you thurely ought to diet—a girl ath thtout ath you are."

"I think I've heard you remark something of the sort before," sighed Margery wearily. "I wish you would forget that I weigh—well, never mind how much! The subject is a distressing one. I'm almost too hungry to-night to think of anything except eating."

Tommy's mischievous glance roved about, resting first on Harriet, who with flushed face was bending over the fire, then on Miss Elting, who was slicing bacon. In addition to the bacon there was to be coffee, supplemented by a few biscuits. There was nothing very hearty about that repast for healthy girls who had tramped for hours under a warm September

sun. Still, there were no complaints, save as Tommy and Margery had voiced their disgust with their present life.

Though none of these young women could guess it, they were destined, before morning, to encounter enough excitement to make them all wish they had never started on this long walk from Camp Wau-Wau, where they had spent the summer, to their homes in Meadow-Brook.

Surely the Meadow-Brook Girls need no introduction to the readers of this series who will recall how, under the chaperonage of Miss Elting, the four girls had gone to the summer camp in the Pocono Woods, where, somehow, each day of their life had grown increasingly exciting. All of the things that happened to Harriet and her friends at that time are set forth in the first volume of this series, under the title of "The Meadow-Brook Girls Under Canvas." While in the summer camp the Meadow-Brook Girls had passed through many varied and exciting experiences. The mischievous initiation of Harriet Burrell and Grace Thompson by the older girls, the arrival in the camp of Jane McCarthy, known to her friends as "Crazy Jane" and the series of lively happenings that followed her coming; the nocturnal visit of a bear, and Harriet's spirited chase of

the animal were incidents that contributed to the interest of the narrative.

Harriet's brave rescue of her companions during a severe storm and her subsequent generous treatment of the two Camp Girls, Patricia Scott and Cora Kidder, who had plotted against her, won for her the warm admiration of her associates at Camp Wau-Wau.

When it had come time to leave the camp in the great forest it had been agreed by the Meadow-Brook Girls and their guardian that, instead of returning by train they would walk all the way home, disdaining any "lifts" or other helps that prevented them from making their way strictly on foot.

So endeared had "Crazy Jane" McCarthy become to them all during her stay in camp that she had been voted as one of their number. Crazy Jane, however, would hear of but little walking. She sent for her automobile, a present from her father, and insisted on using this in "scouting" and in carrying the tent and provisions for the Pathfinders, as the Meadow-Brook Girls now elected to call themselves.

Each night Jane would meet the girls at a place agreed upon in advance. Then the tent would be pitched at some distance from the highway, and there the girls would spend the night. But now, on the third day, the Meadow-

Brook Girls had failed to meet their supply car. What they were to do for the night, Miss Elting did not know. Her first move was to see to the preparation of the little food that they had with them.

Jane McCarthy, with a full purse and a wealthy, indulgent father, had claimed the right of being purveyor of food on that long journey. The speed at which that young woman traveled permitted of her foraging far and wide. Wherever she went she was likely to be remembered, for it was her reckless driving that had given her the name of "Crazy Jane." Yet this light-hearted, impulsive girl had wonderful control of her machine. With all her reckless driving she had never yet injured any one, though her friends often remonstrated with her for her haphazard style of running her car.

Supper finished, Margery and Hazel were left to attend to the dishes, and to put them in the packs, which were ordinary hunters' bags, made to strap over the shoulders.

"After you have finished the work, girls," directed Miss Elting, "be sure to extinguish the last spark of the fire. Harriet, will you come with me?"

"Thay, where are you going?" cried Grace. "Pleathe don't go away and leave uth here alone. It ith going to be dark, pretty thoon."

"Don't you want a place to sleep?" smiled the guardian.

"Yeth, but it'th getting dark," Tommy insisted.

"All the more reason for finding sleeping quarters," smiled Miss Elting.

"Are you thinking of trying the barns?" asked Harriet, as she and the guardian stepped away.

"Yes. I don't see anything else to do."

"We're going to have a storm," Harriet went on thoughtfully, "so of course we shall do well to secure more shelter than we could get by making a brush lean-to."

"I don't believe we are in the least danger of being disturbed in the barn," the guardian continued. "I don't imagine there are any other human beings within several miles of this place. This is certainly a very lonesome bit of country. It is the first day since we have been out that we haven't met some one. That may be because we have kept away from the roads to-day. We haven't been on a highway more than an hour all day long."

"This is what I like," answered Harriet. "I just love to strike out across country and blaze new trails. It's ever so much more interesting. But, Miss Elting, are you certain there is no one about?"

The guardian halted sharply and faced her companion. She knew Harriet Burrell too well not to understand that the girl's question was significant.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I saw some one not far from camp when we were eating our supper," was Harriet's quiet announcement.

"You are sure of that?"

"Yes; it was just beyond the woods there. At first I thought it a fence post; then all at once the post moved. I saw it was a person."

"What was the person doing, Harriet?"

"The person appeared to be watching us. I also discovered something else. The person was a *woman.*"

Miss Elting threw back her head and laughed merrily.

"I don't think we need to be very much alarmed at that. So long as it wasn't a tramp you saw, we won't disturb ourselves."

"She was a strange looking creature," continued Harriet. "I couldn't make her out very well. All at once she disappeared in the most mysterious fashion. You said something. I glanced up, then back to the place where the woman had been standing and she had gone. It happened in less than half a dozen seconds. She would have to be a pretty lively person to

get out of sight in that time, wouldn't she, Miss Elting?"

The guardian nodded. They had now reached the big barn. Like its surroundings, it was deserted so far as they were able to observe. Miss Elting wished to examine the place while there was still light, so they hurried in, the doors being wide open. The scent of hay was strong on the air as they entered. There were little heaps of hay on the barn floor, and on either side in the mows the hay was piled up high. Ladders led up to the top of the mows from the barn floor.

"This looks nice and comfy, doesn't it?" smiled the guardian.

"The best sort of bedroom," agreed Harriet. "I hope there are no mice here?"

"Mice? Gracious! I hope not, too. I think we can do no better than to climb the ladder to the top of one of the mows, roll up in our blankets and go to sleep. Which bedroom will you take, the north or the south?"

"I think I should prefer the room on the south side. One is more likely to get the morning sun there," answered Harriet gravely.

Miss Elting laughed.

"Thank you. I hadn't thought of it in that light. The south side bedroom will be best for the Meadow-Brook Girls. I know Jane Mc-

Carthy would enjoy this sort of camping out. As it is, she will have to sleep at a farm house to-night. She will never be able to find us here. Suppose you climb the ladder and see how the land lies."

"You mean the hay," chuckled Harriet, running up the ladder with agility. "Oh, it is fine up here, and just as warm as can be. Won't it be splendid to sleep on the hay?" she called down, peering over the edge of the mow.

After gazing over the mows for some moments Harriet finally descended to the floor. Next she and Miss Elting made a survey of the yard back of the barn. The yard was surrounded by empty sheds and great stacks of hay and straw. It was evident that the owners intended to winter considerable stock in this remote place.

"Well, what do you think of it, Harriet?" inquired Miss Elting.

"Glorious! It is as clean and sweet here as in our own bedrooms at home. I'll tell you what I will do. I'll run back and get the girls," said Harriet.

Miss Elting nodded acquiescence and Harriet hurried across the field, the teacher remaining at the barn to investigate the place further while Harriet went for her companions. This she did, and decided that they were most for-

tunate in finding so comfortable a place in which to spend the night.

Half an hour later she heard them coming. Tommy's chatter sounded louder than the conversation of all the rest of the party. Twilight had settled over the interior of the barn by the time the girls came trooping in.

"Br-r-r-r! This place looks spooky," cried Margery. "We aren't going to stay in here all night, are we, Miss Elting?"

"Yes, Margery. You are not afraid of the dark, are you?"

"No-o-o. But——"

"There is nothing to alarm you. As we are all rather tired, I propose that we go upstairs and get to bed at once. I am sorry we shall not be able to get our baths this evening. This hotel isn't provided with bath tubs. By the way. There are matches in our packs, so we will leave them below. One of the first things a Camp Girl learns, you know, is to be careful of fire both indoors and out. Strap your blanket rolls over your shoulders. You know it is quite a climb to your bedrooms."

"Up there is where we sleep," Harriet informed them. The top of the mow was not discernible from the barn floor now.

"What! Away up there?" demanded Margery. "How do we get up?"

"We shall have to climb the ladder," answered Miss Elting.

Margery groaned.

"I'm glad it's dark. If it were daylight I know I should fall," declared Hazel. "Let me go first. I don't want to stand here and think about what is before me. If I stop to think I'll never have the courage to climb."

"Don't look down," cautioned the guardian. "There. That's fine."

Hazel was going up rapidly. Margery, with many a groan, next essayed the climb. Harriet was directly behind her. Margery had not gone far before the wisdom of Harriet's action became apparent. A wail from Margery brought a chorus of "ohs!" from her companions.

"I can't go another step," gasped Margery. "I'm going to fall. Catch me somebody."

"Margery, keep on climbing. I'm right below you here. Go on," urged Harriet.

"Oh, I—I can't. I'm dizzy."

"Buthter ith theathick," observed Tommy from the barn floor. Harriet began lightly, tapping Buster with a switch that she had brought with her.

"Oh! Ouch! Stop it! I tell you stop it!" howled Margery.

"Climb!"

Margery *did* climb. She went up the ladder

faster than she ever had climbed before, wailing and threatening every foot of the way. Tommy was delightedly dancing about on the barn floor during all this time, uttering a perfect volley of unintelligible lisps and jeering cries. Margery reached the top of the ladder and flung herself panting on the hay.

"Be careful not to come too near the edge." warned Harriet, hurriedly clambering down. Buster made no reply. She was too much out of breath to say a word. "Now, let's see what *you* can do, Tommy. See if you can do any better," chuckled Harriet.

"You jutht thee me climb. I'll thhow you. I gueth I know how to climb. Buthter ith too fat to climb a ladder. Don't you hit me. I'll kick you if you do," was her parting admonition as she began running up the ladder. Rather to the amazement of her companions, Grace made the climb to the haymow without the least difficulty. Only once did her foot slip from a rung of the ladder. Grace recovered it with no more than a smothered little exclamation.

"You next, Miss Elting," nodded Harriet.

"I will wait until you get up. I wish to look after the packs first. What would we do were we to lose them? We shouldn't have a thing to eat for breakfast, and goodness knows when we will reach a store to purchase food."

It was not long afterwards that the party of young women were fussing about in the hay, making their beds for the night. This consisted in leveling off the hay and spreading their blankets. Some little time was occupied in working out the uneven spots, but after a time they lay down with piled-up hay for pillows, and rolled themselves in their blankets.

The girls went to sleep almost at once. Miss Elting, however, remained awake until her charges had finally settled down, as she supposed, for the night. She was just about to doze off when she was awakened by a scream and a commotion at one end of the mow. The guardian sprang up in alarm.

"For mercy's sake! What is it?" she cried.

"Oh, thave me!" wailed Tommy.

Miss Elting and Harriet groped their way to Grace.

"I got a bug in my ear. Yeth I did. It bit me. I won't thtay here another minute. I'll——"

"I'll go out doors and sleep," declared Margery in disgust. "The idea of being kept awake all night by that crazy girl."

"Margery!" rebuked the guardian. "Now, Tommy, you must lie down and go to sleep. This will not do at all."

"I will drag my blanket over and keep her

company, Miss Elting," offered Harriet. "Perhaps she did get bitten. I felt some sort of insect crawling over my face a moment ago. There now, Tommy, you just snuggle down and forget all about it."

"I don't like bugth," complained Tommy, somewhat mollified. A few moments later she was sound asleep. Harriet, after making sure that Grace was slumbering, once more permitted herself to doze off. She had been asleep but a few moments when a wild scream of terror awakened them all. Harriet felt the blanket jerked violently from her and heard a floundering and threshing on all sides that filled her with alarm. Stretching out her hand she found that Tommy was no longer beside her. Tommy's voice rose in a loud wail of terror.

"Oh, Tommy!" cried Harriet.

"Girls, girls! What *is* the matter?" exclaimed Miss Elting.

"A mouthe, a mouthe!" shrieked Tommy.

"This isn't a hay barn, it's a lunatic asylum," scoffed Margery. "Oh, mercy! Help, help!" she shrieked. The mouse had found Margery too. In the darkness of the haymow the Meadow-Brook Girls were now floundering about in great alarm. Out of the disorder Miss Elting quickly brought order. She spoke sharply to Tommy, insisted that Margery

should return to her blanket and commanded the girls to make no further disturbance.

"The idea that Meadow-Brook Girls should be so timid," she rebuked. "Harriet, I am glad to know that you are not."

"I—I think I should have screamed too if a mouse had—how do you know it was a mouse, Tommy?"

"It ran right over my fathe. I gueth I know what it wath. I gueth I will thleep thanding up. May I, Miss Elting?"

"If you prefer to do so. I am going back to bed. I must insist on the others doing the same, or at least keeping quiet. We shall be in no shape to go on with our journey in the morning at this rate."

Tommy decided that she, too, would lie down and soon their regular breathing told the guardian that most, if not all, of the Meadow-Brook Girls were sound asleep. Harriet, however, now that she had been awakened, found it difficult to go to sleep again. She lay staring up into the darkness for some time.

A sound down on the barn floor put her instantly on the alert. At first she thought some farm animal had wandered into the barn; then the distinct sound of human footsteps, reached her ears.

Harriet Burrell listened intently, as yet un-

afraid. She crawled cautiously to the edge of the mow and peered over. A human form was faintly outlined down there. The figure was groping along the edge of the mow and muttering. The listener was unable to make out the words. At last the intruder uttered a sharp little exclamation of satisfaction, then began to climb the ladder on the opposite side of the barn floor.

"It's a woman!" gasped Harriet. "Who can it be, and what does she want here?" With straining ears and closed eyes the Meadow-Brook girl listened. She heard the woman reach the top of the ladder and step off into the hay. A few moments later Harriet heard her mumbling at the far side of the mow, over near the opposite end of the hay barn. "How strange!" muttered the girl.

A low, distant rumble of thunder attracted her attention in another direction. A moment later a faint flash of lightning dispelled the gloom a little.

"The storm is coming. I hope the girls won't wake up." The darkness now seemed to be more intense than before. Harriet was unable to distinguish one object from another. She crawled back toward her bed and was about to wrap herself in her blanket again when a second time she heard footsteps on the barn

floor. This time she scrambled back to the edge more hastily than before. At first she thought the woman had climbed down and was going away from the mow. The girl leaned far over. She could see no one this time, but she plainly heard some one climbing up the opposite ladder again. Harriet wondered if it were tramps; then she recalled that the first visitor, being a woman, would be unlikely to be a tramp.

"It must be some one seeking shelter from the coming storm," Harriet finally decided, now wondering if it would not be advisable to wake up Miss Elting. Upon second thought the girl decided not to do so. Instead, she leaned farther out over the edge of the mow and peered down anxiously.

A flash of lightning, more brilliant than the first, lighted up the barn from end to end. By the light of the flash Harriet Burrell saw that which set her nerves to tingling and caused her to utter a suppressed gasp.

Below her on the barn floor stood a man. He was swarthy; his coal black hair hung down in long, glistening locks. His eyes, large and very black were gazing right up into the girl's face. She shrank back trembling.

"Oh!" gasped the Meadow-Brook girl. "Oh! He saw me. Oh, what shall I do?"

The man began climbing the ladder on her

side of the barn. Harriet could hear him plainly. She began crawling back into the mow on her hands and knees. Her first inclination, on reaching her blanket, was to burrow under the hay so as to be out of sight. But it occurred to her that her companions would still be in plain sight were another flash of lightning to illumine the mow. Harriet promptly decided to lie still and await developments. She knew that Miss Elting carried a revolver, and that the guardian was proficient in its use. This thought gave Harriet comfort. Besides, what was there to fear?

To add to the excitement a second man entered the barn at this juncture. But instead of climbing up after the other man he took the opposite ladder up which the woman had gone a few moments before. The man on the girls' side was rapidly nearing the top. Harriet lay trembling, hoping there would be no more lightning. Suddenly a brilliant flash lighted up the barn from end to end. It revealed the man clinging to the ladder, his head on a level with the top of the mow, glancing over it keenly, searchingly. Harriet's left hand stole toward Miss Elting who lay within easy reach. It was Harriet's intention to awaken her as quietly as possible as soon as the light died away. But ere her hand descended on Miss Elting's arm,

something occurred that made this move on Harriet Burrell's part, unnecessary.

CHAPTER II

THE RED EYE IN THE DARK

THERE was an ominious snapping sound; then the rung of the ladder gave way and the man fell backward to the floor.

"Oh! He has fallen!" gasped Harriet in dismay, as she scrambled hastily toward the edge of the mow. "He must be seriously injured."

"What ith that noithe?" demanded Grace.

"Sh-h-h!" warned Harriet softly.

Nothing more was heard from Grace for the time being. She had dropped to sleep again. Fortunately none of the others had been awakened by the racket, but Harriet's heart was beating rapidly. She leaned over the edge of the mow. What the next flash of lightning revealed relieved her anxiety somewhat. She saw the man get up and rub his back. She saw, too, that he had fallen on a heap of hay, the latter undoubtedly having saved him from severe injury. A moment later he limped across the floor and began climbing up the ladder on the other side of the barn.

"Thank goodness!" muttered Harriet. "I hope no more of them come in here to-night. I shall scream if they do. I know I shall."

The man threw himself, grumbling, on the hay; silence once more settled over the barn so far as the occupants were concerned. The thunder was now growing louder, the lightning flashes became more frequent. Harriet, however felt no particular alarm. She was unafraid of thunder storms, and gave no thought to the fact that barns are more frequently struck by lightning than are dwelling houses.

By this time her companions had begun to stir restlessly. Miss Elting sat up.

"Harriet, is that you?" she asked in a low tone.

"Yes."

"What are you doing?"

"Just looking about a little," replied Harriet in a whisper, not deeming it advisable to alarm the guardian by telling her what she had just discovered.

"How long has it been storming?" asked the guardian.

"Only a little while. I do not believe it is going to amount to anything. I hope this old barn doesn't leak."

"No, I do not believe it will. There is too much valuable hay here. The owner undoubt-

edly has seen to it that the roof is sound. Are you going to try to sleep?"

"Yes."

Harriet lay down, but she did not sleep. The memory of the old woman and the two men over in the other mow, banished all thought of sleep from her mind. She did not know whether the woman knew the men were there or not. Perhaps they might belong to the same party. However, there had been no conversation between them and while the two men were near the outer edge of the mow, the woman was at the far end of the barn as nearly as Harriet was able to determine.

Soon after that, rain drops began to patter on the barn roof. Then it began to rain heavily. Harriet nestled deeper into the blanket and lay listening. There was no sound from their neighbors on the other side.

At last the listening girl closed her eyes. No sooner had she done so than she opened them again. A flash of lightning, more brilliant than any she had yet seen, was playing along the rafters of the barn. The thunder followed the flash just as Harriet threw an arm over her eyes to shut out the light. It was not a particularly heavy clap of thunder, just a quick, sharp report. Above the report a shrill scream of terror rang out. Then all was silent.

Instantly every one of the Meadow-Brook Girls sat up wide awake.

"What—what is it?" cried Margery.

"Girls! Girls!" are you all right?" called the guardian.

"Oh, what ith it? Did the barn fall down?" wailed Tommy in great alarm.

"What has happened?" questioned Hazel Holland excitedly.

Harriet did not speak. She was listening to what the others of her party had not noticed, a sudden sound of voices in the other mow, and the hasty clambering down the ladder of the two men she had seen go to the opposite mow. At least she believed it to be the two men. Evidently they had become alarmed, either by the lightning, the scream of the woman, or by the cries of the Meadow-Brook Girls. They ran out of the barn, making no attempt to go quietly. Once on the outside she heard one of them shout.

"I heard thome one!" exclaimed Tommy.

"So did I," agreed Hazel.

"I thought I, too, heard some one cry out," said Miss Elting. "Perhaps it was a night bird fleeing from the storm."

"It was no night bird, Miss Elting," said Harriet in a low tone. "Did you hear that scream? Some one is in trouble. There is a

woman on the other side of the mow. What shall we do?"

"A woman?"

"Yes, yes. She climbed up to the mow a long time ago. Oh, look, look!"

A tiny red eye had suddenly appeared at the far end of the hay barn. It appeared to have risen out of the hay at the extreme end of the opposite mow. The girls gazed at it in silence. They did not understand the meaning of the strange dull red spot. Even Harriet was for the moment, puzzled. Then all at once she understood.

"Quick! Get down to the floor! Don't waste a minute! Miss Elting please look after the girls. There's a rung on the ladder broken. Watch that no one falls. I'm going."

"Harriet! Harriet! What do you mean?"

The woman! I must get her. I may want you to help me. If I call you, come at once. Oh, I must hurry, Miss Elting."

"Thee! That red eye ith getting bigger," cried Tommy.

"It is fire, Miss Elting," whispered Harriet. "The barn is on fire. The last bolt of lightning must have set fire to the hay. Don't tell the girls now, but get them down to the barn floor as quickly as possible. There is going to be an awful fire."

Harriet bounded toward the ladder.

"Harriet! Don't go. I will go," shouted the guardian.

"I know where she is," cried Harriet, swinging herself to the ladder using care not to lose her footing on the broken rung.

"The broken rung is the fifth one down," she called. Grasping the sides of the ladder she permitted herself to slide all the way to the bottom, wholly unconscious of the fact that the skin was being scraped from the palms of her hands.

Reaching the barn floor the girl dashed across it to the opposite side. A few precious seconds were lost in groping for the ladder there. She found it, ran up with the speed of a squirrel, then went stumbling and falling across the mow toward the red eye that was now growing into a great red glare.

"Where are you?" she cried, raising her voice to a high pitch.

There was no response from her side. From the other mow came the answer from Margery, who did not understand: "We're here."

The red eye was now lighting up the far end of the mow so that Harriet was able to see much more clearly. Little piles of hay formed deceiving shadows. She ran first to one, then to another, in this way losing precious seconds.

All at once the girl caught sight of a dark object lying on the hay. She ran toward it. It was the huddled form of an old woman, her eyes wide and staring. Harriet feared she was dead. The fire had already crept perilously near to the woman. The flames at one point had communicated with the roof and were eating their way through it. The girls on the other mow now realized that the barn was on fire. A chorus of wails reached Harriet. But she knew her companions were in good hands, that Miss Elting would get them out safely.

Harriet grasped the old woman under the arms and began dragging her toward the edge of the mow.

"I've got her!" she screamed. "Come and help me as soon as you can, Miss Elting. Get the girls down and make them go outside. You will have to hurry. The roof may fall in. Make a rope of the blankets. We shall have to lower her to the ground. She is helpless."

"I'll be with you in a moment," called the calm, confident voice of the guardian. Miss Elting was always to be depended upon in an emergency. She had gotten the other girls safely down before Harriet had called out to her, thinking that Harriet might need her undivided assistance in rescuing the woman from her perilous position.

"Outdoors, girls, every one of you," she commanded. "Don't you dare come near the barn! Harriet is rescuing some one from the other mow. I am going to help her. Leave the blankets, but take the packs with you." She gave the protesting Tommy a push toward the door. Hazel grasped Grace by the arm and hurried her out of the barn. Margery needed no assistance. She was in as great a hurry to leave the barn as Miss Elting was to have her do so.

The guardian climbed the ladder as rapidly as possible, after having knotted the five blankets into a kind of rope. She tested each knot with her full strength; then being satisfied that the rope would stand a heavy strain, she began climbing the ladder holding one end of the blanket rope. At the top of the ladder the heat was suffocating, the smoke blinding. Harriet was coughing and choking. She was on the verge of collapse, having inhaled a great deal of smoke.

"Will—will it reach?" Miss Elting gasped.

"I think so."

"Ti—ie it under her arms. Go below to catch her if she falls. I'll let her down," promised Harriet.

"Get down yourself as fast as you can," commanded the guardian.

Harriet did not move. She buried her head in her skirt and crouched down close to the edge of the mow in an effort to get some fresh air, but without very great success.

"Now go, please," urged Harriet. "You are strong enough to catch her if the rope breaks. I'm not. I know how to handle it at this end. Hurry, Miss Elting. We haven't a second to lose."

Miss Elting hesitated, glanced quickly at her companion, then started down the ladder. Harriet took a quick turn of the rope about a beam. Without the least hesitation, she slid the unconscious woman over the edge of the mow feet first. The girl prayed fervently that the rope might hold. It did. Little by little, though as rapidly as she dared, the girl lowered her burden. Sparks were flying all about her. She stood enveloped in a cloud of smoke, but not for an instant did the girl give thought to her own perilous position.

"I've got her," screamed Miss Elting. "Come down. Be quick, oh do be quick."

Harriet's fingers released the rope. She staggered toward the ladder groping blindly for it. Reaching it she sank down choking.

"Can you make it?" called the guardian.

"Yes," was the faint reply. "Get—get her out."

Miss Elting seeing that Harriet was coming down the ladder, hastily dragged the unconscious woman out into the open air. The way seemed endless to the descending girl. About half way down her fingers relaxed. Harriet fell, landing heavily in a heap on the barn floor. She lay where she had fallen, with the flames crackling overhead as they leaped across the intervening space and began devouring the mow on the opposite side.

CHAPTER III

A BLESSING AND A THREAT

FROM end to end of the great hay barn the roof was now wrapped in flames. Now the stacks at the rear began blazing. The entire building was doomed to destruction. In the meantime, Miss Elting, having dragged the woman to a point of safety, was working to revive her. So engrossed was she that, for the moment, all thought of Harriet Burrell escaped her until she was reminded of Harriet by Tommy.

"Where ith Harriet?" piped Tommy.

"Harriet? Oh!" gasped the guardian.

Tommy understood without further explanation and darted toward the barn, with Miss

Elting running after her to bring her back. But there was no stopping Tommy when once she had started to carry out a resolve. She ran to the barn on winged feet and plunged into the dense cloud of smoke that issued from the burning barn. The little girl had no idea what she would do when she got there, and perhaps she might have been injured before Miss Elting reached her, had Tommy not fallen accidently over Harriet. The latter was unconscious from the smoke she had inhaled. Tommy grabbed her by the arms and began dragging her out. The little girl had gotten to the door with her burden as Miss Elting reached the scene.

"Brave Tommy!" cried the guardian. "You shall have a whole string of Camp Girls' beads for this. Let Harriet lie where she is for the present. Place her on her back so the rain may beat in her face. She will be all right in a few moments."

Miss Elting did not know that Harriet had fallen, and that it was not only the smoke but the shock of the fall as well that had overcome her.

"But, thuppothe the barn fallth down!" exclaimed Tommy.

"Yes, you are right. We must get her farther away." Together they carried Harriet out to the place where the old woman lay.

When they reached there the old woman was sitting up looking about her in a dazed manner. Shouts and cries off toward the highway told the little company that men were hastening to the scene of the fire.

Harriet became conscious in a short time, but she had frequent coughing spells for some minutes.

"That ith right. Cough up all the thmoke," suggested Tommy wisely. "You'll feel better after you get the thmoke out of your thythtem. I know, for I thwallowed a lot of thmoke once."

The men ran past the party of women, shouting and gesticulating. There were a dozen of them. Others could be heard approaching the scene of the fire. Harriet, as soon as she was able to talk, and the coughing spells became less frequent, went over to the woman she had rescued. The swarthy complexion, straight black hair, and piercing black eyes of the woman were the same characteristics that Harriet had observed in the man who had fallen from the ladder.

"Do you feel better?" questioned Harriet, smiling a little.

The old woman nodded, her eyes never leaving the face of her questioner for an instant.

"You have this young woman to thank for being alive," Miss Elting informed the old

woman, stepping up to her and nodding toward Harriet.

"You saved me, eh?" questioned the stranger, looking searchingly at the girl.

Harriet did not reply, but Miss Elting answered for her.

"You saved Sybarina from fire from the skies?" insisted the woman.

"She means the lightning," suggested Hazel.

"Yes, she did," repeated Miss Elting. "She climbed the ladder to the hay loft and let you down with blankets tied together. Our blankets are there yet."

"Oh, I forgot them," cried Harriet. "How thoughtless of me! Now we shall have nothing to sleep in."

"Never mind the blankets. We have others in the car."

"You saved Sybarina?" repeated the old woman, staggering to her feet. She had been temporarily paralyzed from the electric bolt, and was as yet barely able to stand on her feet.

"Please don't mention it," urged Harriet, flushing.

The old woman seized Harriet's hand and gazed deeply into it by the light of the burning barn. As she gazed she swayed her body from side to side with quick, nervous movements.

"Ah! Sybarina sees that which pleases her,"

crooned the old woman. "She sees a noble girl whom the fires from the skies cannot frighten. And she sees more. She sees wealth and happiness and a great future for her who fears not the fire from above. Sybarina gives you her blessing."

A heavy hand was laid on the old woman's shoulder.

"Here, you Gipsy woman. Were you sleeping in that barn?" demanded a gruff voice.

"I met two Gipsy men running across the fields to the west as I came down," answered another male voice. "The Gipsies are camped about a mile and a half from here. I think we ought to arrest the old woman, don't you, Squire?"

"Sybarina was asleep in the barn," admitted the Gipsy woman.

"And you set the barn on fire, too," declared the squire. "I'll have to arrest you."

"She didn't set the barn on fire, sir," defended Harriet Burrell.

"The fires from the skies made the barn burn," announced the Gipsy woman.

"Who are you?" demanded the man, turning sharply to Harriet. "I suppose you will tell me *you* weren't sleeping in my barn?"

"On the contrary, we were," interjected Miss Elting.

"Then I arrest the whole parcel of you."

"Thave me!" wailed Tommy Thompson. "We didn't thet your old barn on fire. We were jutht thleeping there, that wath all."

"You will all stay here till I get through with this fire; then I'll hold court on you and if you don't answer to suit me I'll have you all over to the county seat to-morrow."

"No one set your barn on fire, sir," declared Harriet, with emphasis. "The barn was struck by lightning."

"Did you see it?"

"I can't say that I saw the lightning strike, but I saw the flash, then saw the fire start up directly afterwards. I heard this woman scream and we hurried to her rescue. She was unconscious. The bolt had nearly killed her. That proves that it was lightning, not matches, that set your barn on fire."

"What were you doing in my barn?"

"Thleeping with the mithe and the bugth," volunteered Tommy.

"Who be you? You ain't Gipsies?"

"No. We are from Meadow-Brook, and we are walking home from the Pocono Woods, where we have been spending the summer in camp," Miss Elting informed the man.

"So, that's it, hey?"

"Yes, sir. A young woman friend of ours

usually meets us at night. She has our equipment in her automobile, but we took the wrong trail to-day, and have lost her. She is over in the other valley waiting for us, I think."

"Is she a crazy woman with light hair that streams over her shoulders, and does she drive her car as though she was running a race?"

"From your description I think you must have met Miss McCarthy," answered the guardian, smiling a little. "Have you seen her to-day?"

"I should say I had. She nigh killed a calf of mine this afternoon. I'd just like to get my grip on her once. I'd make her answer to the law."

"Was your calf in the road, sir?" questioned Harriet.

"Yes. What of it?"

"I don't believe the law would do anything to Miss McCarthy in that case. Of course I am sorry for the calf," said Harriet.

"Oh, the calf ain't hurt. Jest lost a little hair off her tail, shaved off as close as ye could do it with a razor. But that don't matter. It's the barn and nigh onto a hundred tons of hay gone up in smoke that bothers me. I wisht I was sure you was telling the truth. If I thought you weren't I'd have you all in the lock-up afore morning."

"Are—are there any mithe in the lock-up?" questioned Tommy apprehensively.

"Eh? Stacks all gone, too?" This in answer to a word from a farmer who came from the rear of the burning barn. "Well, let 'em go. There'll be another crop of hay next year. Mebby the price'll be better then."

The loss of his barn did not appear to trouble the "Squire" greatly. All the time he was talking he was regarding the women out of the corners of his eyes. He saw that they were drenched through and through. Tommy and Margery were shivering. He decided that they were persons of some consequence, even if they had been sleeping in his barn. His reflections were interrupted by Miss Elting.

"Can you tell me which way the young woman and the car went?"

"Can I? I guess I can. She went east. The calf could tell ye, too, if she could talk, but she wouldn't say it quite so easy like as I'm tellin' you now."

"Jane was looking for us," nodded Miss Elting. "She must have reasoned that we had gotten into this valley by mistake."

"Where you going to stay the rest of the night?" questioned the squire gruffly.

"I am afraid we shall have to stay out in the rain if we don't succeed in finding another

barn," laughed the guardian. "My girls are pretty well used to roughing it, though they never before passed quite such a night as this has been. Do you know of a farm house nearby where we may get lodgings? We are perfectly willing to sleep on the floor in the kitchen, provided we can have the room to dry out our clothes, and we shall be glad and willing to pay for the trouble."

"You may come home with me," answered the man, after a brief hesitation.

"What is your name, sir?" questioned Miss Elting.

"Squire Olney, Miss. You see I ain't a squire by appointment. The neighbors jest call me that because I settle their difficulties. I've got more land in this township than all the rest of them put together. That's why I ain't takin' the burnin' of the barn to heart so much as you think I ought to," he added, with a broad smile.

"Have you a family at home?" questioned Miss Elting.

"My wife and I are alone. Children all married."

"How far is it from here to your home, sir?"

"About a mile right over the hill. What do you say?"

"We will go with you. We thank you for your kindness. I am very sorry, indeed, that

you have lost your barn and your hay," said the guardian in a sympathetic tone.

The squire leaned toward her.

"I ain't lost anything," he said, with a wink. "Insured. Insured plumb up to the muzzle, and then some more. Boys, I'm going home to show the ladies the way. You can have all the hay that's left. I want the ashes for fertilizer. Ashes is good for the cut worms in the cabbage patch. Come on, ladies."

Squire Olney nodded to them and started away. He halted sharply.

"Where's that old Gipsy woman? She ain't included in the invitation."

"Why, she has gone," exclaimed Hazel. "I didn't see her go. Did you, Harriet?"

Harriet Burrell shook her head. She was puzzled at the mysterious disappearance of Sybarina, who had given her rescuer her blessing, then so strangely slipped away.

The walk over the hill did not add to the comfort of the Meadow-Brook Girls. They splashed through deep puddles of water in the little hollows, slipped and stumbled over bare clay spots, fell over stones and roots until they were not only soaked to the skin, but badly bruised as well. Margery wailed and groaned all the way. Tommy made fun of her until they came in sight of the lights in the farm house.

"That's the old shack that has covered us for nigh onto fifty years," he said, nodding toward the light in the window.

The light and the comfortable looking old farm house made the Meadow-Brook Girls almost forget their sodden condition. Mrs. Olney was standing on the front porch, gazing down across the field. She recognized the squire's voice, but she was at a loss to understand who his companions were.

"Hello, Martha," he sang out, as he crossed the road with his party.

"That you, Squire?"

"Yep. Me and the girls. Barn all burned down, but I've brought the leavings. Me and the girls is all right, Martha. But they're wetter than Old Sixty. Poke up the kitchen fire and let them dry their clothing."

Miss Elting stepped forward and shook hands with Mrs. Olney, briefly explaining how they came to be there at that time of the night.

"Female tramps. Got fired from sleepin' in the squire's hay barn," chuckled the old man.

Mrs. Olney led the way into the house, where she turned and surveyed her callers critically.

"Why, you poor things!" she cried, when she had gotten a good look at the Meadow-Brook Girls. "And you sleepin' in the barn. It's a shame," she exclaimed, bustling about.

"Squire, you tend to that fire yerself. I'll git out some dry clothing for these girls. Then I'll see about making some coffee and getting them something to eat. Come into my bedroom, my dears and change your wet clothes."

"I am afraid that we are putting you to a great deal of trouble," demurred Miss Elting.

"Not a bit of it," rejoined Mrs. Olney. "Come right along with me."

Half an hour later, Miss Elting and the Meadow-Brook Girls clothed in dressing gowns and wrappers belonging to the hospitable Mrs. Olney sat in the big farm house kitchen doing full justice to the luncheon provided by the farmer's wife. After their exciting experiences of the night the girls were tired enough to gladly welcome the opportunity of sleeping in a real bed, and in spite of their late repast the five wayworn travelers slept peacefully, unvisited by nightmares.

CHAPTER IV

THE COMING OF CRAZY JANE

AFTER bidding good-bye to the hospitable squire and his good wife, next morning, the girls started over the fields on their way down the valley on the other side of the

ridge. Before leaving they had pressed their camp dresses and the girls now looked very neat in their dark blue uniforms that they had worn at Camp Wau-Wau. They wore also the official hat of the Camp Girls, to which organization they belonged. The hat was of blue cloth with the letters "C. G." in white embroidered on the front.

About their necks the girls wore a few brightly colored beads which to them meant more than precious stones, for each girl had won her beads by achievements as a Camp Girl. They hoped to win more on the long tramp across country. Harriet and Tommy had won several beads apiece, already, by their bravery at the barn fire, though of course the beads had not been awarded as yet. That would not be until after Miss Elting had made her report to the Chief Guardian at the completion of the trip.

The girls were now well on their way hoping soon to find Jane McCarthy and her car awaiting them. It was a five mile tramp over rough and steep hills, through woods and ravines. By this time however the Meadow-Brook Girls were becoming accustomed to rough traveling. The only one who made any really serious complaints was Margery Brown. She was usually in distress, but it was observed that the stout

girl was beginning to lose considerable flesh. Her freckles were more pronounced, however, and her face was redder than it ever had been before.

The party, after a trying hike, reached the top of the range of hills about eleven o'clock in the morning. A long, sloping meadow stretched away from them until it met the highway.

"There is the road," cried Harriet.

"But Crazy Jane ith nowhere in thight," observed Tommy solemnly.

"This is where we should have been last night," nodded Miss Elting. "But we should have missed all of our exciting experiences of last night had we taken the right trail."

"Missed them!" exclaimed Margery. "I wish we had. I never shall get over thinking about that awful fire and that horrid old Gipsy woman."

Harriet smiled to herself thinking that it was well that Margery had not seen the dark-faced men enter the barn that night.

"Shall we wait, or go on?" questioned Harriet.

Miss Elting decided that they should go on after reaching the highway. She told the girls to keep a sharp lookout for "signs." The sign of the Meadow-Brook Girls was a triangle. It

might be found chalked on a fence or elsewhere by the roadside. An arrow pointing away from the triangle indicated the direction in which a Meadow-Brook girl had traveled. An arrow pointing straight up indicated, "I will return." An arrow pointing toward the ground meant, "wait here." A broken arrow, pointing in any direction indicated, "danger."

Reaching the highway the girls scanned the fences. Most of these being wire fences there was no space for any of the signs that they had agreed upon before starting out on their tramp. Occasionally they halted to examine a sign board at the junction of two or more roads, but nowhere did they find any trace of Jane and her car. There were not even tire tracks in the road. The pedestrians had almost made up their minds that Crazy Jane herself had missed her way when Harriet suddenly held up her hand.

"I hear the honk of a motor horn," she said.

"And there's the sign on that hog pen," laughed Miss Elting, pointing to a pig sty close to where they were standing. "That's just like Jane. The arrow says we are to wait here."

"A pig pen ith thertainly a nithe plathe to wait," observed Tommy sarcastically.

"We don't have to wait in the pen, you goose," jeered Margery.

"Tho I thee," answered Tommy imperturbably.

"There she comes!" shouted Hazel.

Crazy Jane McCarthy, her blonde hair streaming over her shoulders, rounded a bend in the road, the rear wheels of her car skidding nearly to the ditch on the outside of the curve. Jane was shouting and waving one hand. She brought the car up sliding and leaped to the ground.

"You dears! Where have you been?" she cried, embracing each of the girls in turn, not forgetting Miss Elting.

"The question, is where have you been?" laughed the guardian.

"Racing up and down the road looking for you," returned Jane.

"Where did you sleep?" questioned Harriet.

"At a farm house over in the valley," chuckled Jane. "Where did you sleep?"

"We were in a barn part of the night. Regular tramps, aren't we," answered Harriet, her eyes sparkling.

"Yeth, and—and the barn burned down," explained Grace.

"What?"

"Grace is right," Miss Elting informed Jane. "Lightning struck the barn, burning it to the ground. Harriet saved an old Gipsy

woman from being burned to death. She had been stunned by the bolt of lightning and for the time being was paralyzed."

"Oh, what a shame!" exclaimed Jane. "I always have to be absent when the fun is going on. Think of poor me tearing up and down the road, half crazy because I'd lost you and you having so much fun all the time," she complained. "Who was the woman you saved, darlin'?" she questioned, turning admiring eyes on Harriet Burrell.

"A Gipsy. She called herself Sybarina," answered Harriet.

"And did the Gipsy tell your fortune, Harriet?"

"Yes, she did," cried Margery. "She said Harriet was going to be a great lady, rich and some other things that I didn't understand. Then Sybarina gave Harriet her blessing."

"Now, Jane," said Harriet mischievously. "Tell us about the way you ran down the farmer's calf."

Jane gazed at Harriet frowningly, then burst into laughter.

"What do you know about that? Who has been telling tales?"

"The farmer said you shaved the hair off the calf's tail with your car."

"I was sorry for the calf, but you ought to

have seen the farmer wave his arms and run after me. He was fairly pulling the hair out of his head with rage," chuckled Crazy Jane. "Well, dears, what have you in mind? Want to take a nice ride in the car?"

Harriet shook her head with emphasis.

"When we started on this tramp we agreed that we wouldn't ride in your car at all. I, for one, am going to keep to that agreement."

"Don't tempt me," said Hazel, chancing to catch the merry eye of Jane McCarthy.

"We didn't agree not to eat in the car, did we?" questioned Tommy. "That latht gully I fell into gave me an awful appetite."

"Wait! I'll set the table," cried Jane, dashing to the car and unlocking the luggage trunk at the rear. From under the rear seat she took a board, which she laid across the rear compartment. Over this she spread a white cloth and on it began placing a cold luncheon that was sufficiently appetizing in looks to excite the poorest appetite. Tommy eyed it longingly.

"Get in, girls," commanded Jane. They made a rush for the car. "I have a can of milk in the locker, if the jolting of this old wagon hasn't soured it. You see, I drove rather fast this morning. I wanted to find you. I didn't know what had become of you. Yes; the milk is all right."

There in Jane's car by the side of the road they ate their luncheon, giving no heed to the curious glances of passers-by.

"Did the farmer really tell you about that calf?" questioned Jane, when the girls had nearly finished their meal.

"Yes. It was in his barn we slept until it caught fire," explained the guardian. "He then took us to his home and he and his wife were perfectly lovely to us. I wish you had been with us. He is a quaint character."

"If he is anything like his calf, he must be," observed Crazy Jane. "It didn't know enough to get out of the road when it saw an automobile coming at forty-five miles an hour. Where are you going from here?"

"We must consult the map. Are there any good camping places beyond here, or were you going so fast you couldn't see?"

"I never drive so fast that I can't see," reproved Jane. "Yes. I know of a place, and it's a fine place for a camp too. It's called the Willow Ponds. It is just far enough back from the road, and there isn't a house in sight."

"How far is it from here?" asked Hazel.

"Five miles."

"Five mileth!" repeated Tommy wearily.

"Oh, help!" wailed Margery. "My feet won't hold out."

"Then ride with me," suggested Jane.

"Thank you," returned Margery, "but I consider walking the lesser of the two evils."

"I fear it will make too short a hike for us, for one day," reflected Miss Elting.

"It will make a ten mile hike," answered Harriet.

"Yes. But only five miles of walking on the main trail. We shall have advanced only five miles. However, perhaps it will be enough for one day."

"That latht gully I fell into gave me an awful appetite," reiterated Tommy apologetically, as she helped herself to another slice of cold roast beef.

"Tommy's appetite doesn't need that kind of stimulant," laughed Hazel. "Nor does mine. I think I shall have to have another slice of roast beef."

The luncheon ended, the girls reclined on the soft cushions of the car for half an hour, after which Harriet and Jane put away the dishes and the rest of the food.

"Are we ready to hike?" asked Harriet.

Margery's face took on a pained expression.

"Oh, I suppose so," she complained. "The sooner we start the sooner we shall get there. Then a long night's rest in our own tent. Oh, joy, oh, joy!"

"It may not be so very joyous, after all," retorted Miss Elting. "In this topsy-turvy bit of country *anything* may happen, at *any* moment, to keep us awake, or even to banish the wish for sleep."

"What we need," said Tommy soberly, "Ith a nithe, good-natured dog that will bite folkth."

Miss Elting decided that it was time to start. So shouldering their packs the girls moved on.

"I'll be driving behind you," said Crazy Jane. "I'll be pace-maker. If you lag I'll remonstrate by riding over you! How will you like that?"

Miss Elting and Harriet set a good stride. The other girls straggled after them, Margery being last of all. Behind them all Jane drove the car slowly, the engine making no noise.

"We must walk faster, girls!" cried Miss Elting, looking back. "You, especially, Margery. Faster!"

"I couldn't move any faster," protested Margery wearily "even if I were paid for it."

Honk! Honk! Honk! sounded an automobile horn behind her. There was a whirr of fast-moving wheels.

HONK!

Turning, Margery saw the car bearing down upon her at full speed.

"O-o-o-h!" screamed Margery. Picking up

her skirts a trifle she fled down the road, while Jane stopped the car just behind her.

"I'm sorry you can't move fast!" Jane called, teasingly

Twice after that Crazy Jane forced Margery to quicken her lagging steps until at length poor Margery stepped aside, out of the road.

"Not another step for me, Jane McCarthy, unless you keep ahead of the whole party," declared the persecuted Camp Girl.

"Get in and ride," teased Jane.

"I—I believe I will," faltered Margery, who was limping now.

"Margery!" exclaimed Harriet rebukingly, "if you ride, then you will have to drop out of the hike, and we'll send you home."

"I—I think I'll keep on walking," Margery decided meekly.

The rest of the journey was accomplished without further complaints from either Tommy or Margery. Arriving at a place where they left the road and set off across a field, Jane explained that earlier in the day she had asked the permission of the owner of the field to camp there. She thought it would make an excellent camp site, the ponds being screened from the road by a heavy growth of willows, and there was plenty of dry wood to be had from the ruins of an old saw mill that stood near the ponds.

The willows, also, would serve to hide the camp from the gaze of curious outsiders, a condition to be desired by young women tramping through the country.

The car was driven in among the willows, after which Harriet and Miss Elting began hauling the sections of their tent from the rear of the car. They went at the pitching of the tent like veterans, and placed the sections together, then raised the canvas, staking it down with the expertness of circusmen.

Harriet left the final staking-down to Tommy and Margery while she gathered the wood for the campfire. Jane and Miss Elting, in the meantime had begun getting out the supplies for supper. Two folding tables were set up in the tent, covered by fresh table cloths, on which were placed the dishes and the silver knives, forks and spoons that Jane had brought along. She said silver was none too good for the Meadow-Brook Girls. The water in the pond, being from nearby springs, was cool and refreshing. The girls decided to take a swim late in the evening after their suppers had been well digested.

It was a merry party of happy, brown-faced girls that sat down to the evening meal with the cheerful campfire blazing just outside, and the cool, fragrant autumn breezes drifting

through the tent. Everything was charmingly peaceful, but the peace of the night was to be rudely disturbed later in the evening, and the girls were to have another exciting time of it ere they finally got to sleep.

CHAPTER V

CATCHING THE SPECKLED BEAUTIES

"OH, girls, let's stay here the rest of the fall. Let's not walk any more," begged Margery.

"Oh, thee the fithh jump!" cried Tommy, pointing to the pond.

"Trout, too. If I only had a rod and line!" exclaimed Harriet.

"You shall have them, darlin'," answered Jane. "If you want anything you don't see, just ask for it. You'll find the whole fisherman's outfit strapped under the car—under the left mudguard. What about bait?"

"I think the trout will take flies. That is what they are jumping for," replied Harriet. "Where will I find the flies?"

"In the box under the rear seat."

"Thay, Harriet!" piped Tommy.

"Yes?"

"Catch me an oythter for breakfatht."

Harriet paused from jointing Jane's rod long enough to join in the merriment at Tommy's expense.

"Have you a dusty miller, Jane?" she asked, glancing up with flushed face.

"I don't know whether or not he's dusty, but there's an insect in there that they call a miller. Dad says it's a killer. I never saw it show its teeth. It's my opinion that it would be a fool fish that would bite a thing like that."

"You wait and see," chuckled Harriet, fixing the leader of the fly to the silk line, then balancing the rod by its butt, swinging the line this way and that through the air to see how the reel worked.

"It will be too late by the time you get ready to fish," reminded Miss Elting.

"It isn't sunset yet, Miss Elting. There should be good fishing for half an hour yet."

"Well, are you going to fish, or are you going to talk all the time during that half hour?" demanded Margery.

For answer Harriet swung the pole above her head. With a swish the dusty miller described a long curve in the air, then dived for the water, which it took with the faintest possible disturbance.

There followed a swish and a splash. The rod bent until it seemed to the spectators as

though it would break under the strain. A flashing, scintillating body jumped through the air, then plunged down deep into the clear waters of the pond.

"A fithh! A fithh!" screamed Tommy. "Harriet hath got a fithh. Oh, goodie, goodie, goodie!"

"Pull him in. You'll lose him!" shouted Margery.

"Now will you look at our Harriet?" cried Crazy Jane, hugging herself gleefully, swaying her body from side to side in the ecstasy of her delight.

The trout that Harriet Burrell had hooked was a lively fish. It was darting and diving with wonderful strength and quickness. The line cut the water with a swish, swish, swish that was plainly heard by all.

"Get it, Harriet! Oh, do get it," begged Hazel, in an agony of apprehension lest the trout succeed in freeing itself.

"The real fun of catching a fish is 'playing' it, just as Harriet is doing," answered Miss Elting.

Tommy had run out on one of the beams of the old mill race, where she was dancing up and down at the imminent risk of a ducking.

"Now, look out, girls," warned Harriet. "I'm going to try to land him." There was

a lively scurrying on the part of the girls. The trout came up protesting and fighting every inch of the way. Then Harriet, having reeled in the line, pulled the trout in toward the bank.

Unfortunately for Harriet, but fortunately for the fish, Tommy Thompson was in the way. The trout slapped her squarely in the face ere Harriet had discovered her companion's location. There was a shrill scream from Tommy, a light splash as the trout dropped into the pond, then a mighty splash as Tommy, losing her balance, went sprawling into the cold water.

"Oh, I have lost my fish!" wailed Harriet.

"Catch Tommy!" yelled Margery.

Harriet threw down her rod and ran out on the beam where Tommy had been standing before the disaster. Tommy was splashing and coughing, making frantic efforts to reach shore. Harriet knew the little blonde girl could swim, else she would have gone in after her. But Tommy wished to attract all the sympathy and attention of her companions in her direction, so she kept up a continuous screaming. Harriet reached down and gave her a hand.

"How's the water, Tommy?" questioned Harriet, mischievously.

"Co-o-o-old," chattered Tommy. "I'm fr-r-r-r-eezing. What did you knock me in for?"

"Why I didn't realize that you were standing there. Why did you make me lose my fish?"

"There, there, girls! Tommy go into the tent at once and take off your wet clothing. Put on dry clothes unless you wish to go to bed now."

"I don't want to go to bed. I want to watch Harriet catch fithh."

"Oh, you've scared them all out of the pond," complained Margery.

"I hope you fall in, too, Buthter," was Tommy's parting salute, as she ran shivering to the tent. Fifteen minutes later, she emerged clad in dry clothing and apparently none the worse for her recent wetting.

In the meantime Harriet had returned to her fishing, laughing softly over her companion's mishap and their argument following the plunge. There were screams of delight when finally she landed a trout. Nor did she stop until the sun dipped behind the western hills and the speckled beauties went down into the depths of the stream, or skulked under the edge of its banks for the night. The result of the fishing was a dozen fine trout, the smallest weighing only a little under a half pound and the largest weighing nearly two pounds, according to the guardian's estimate.

Harriet insisted on dressing the fish that night, something she knew better how to do than did any of her companions. The fish were then put in a pail, the cover tightly fitted and the pail hung in the old mill race, where the cold water would flow over the receptacle all night long.

"There," exclaimed Harriet after her work was finished. "We shall have a breakfast fit for a king. Now I'm going in bathing. I am so covered with dust and grime that I'm ashamed of myself. Come, girls, aren't you going in with me?"

"What! Go into that ice cold water?" demanded Margery. "No, thank you. I'll heat some water and take my bath in the tent."

"I will go in with you, Harriet," offered Hazel.

"So will I," added the guardian. "Come, let's get ready before the air gets colder. Tommy already has had her bath."

Had they not been inured to cold water and exposure, the experiment might have been followed by severe colds if nothing worse. But the Meadow-Brook Girls were well seasoned from living out of doors for the greater part of the summer and from bathing in the cold stream at Camp Wau-Wau. The first plunge into the pond brought gasps and shivers, then

they splashed about in the water, swimming across the pond and back, again and again, while Margery stood on the bank shivering out of pure sympathy for them.

"That is what I call great," cried Harriet, rising dripping to the bank after Miss Elting had called to the two girls to come out of the water. "I could almost eat another meal after that bath."

"Tho could I," piped Tommy, thrusting her head out from the tent flap.

The two girls and the guardian ran laughing to the tent, where, greatly refreshed by their cold plunge, they changed their wet bathing suits for dry clothing.

Now fresh fuel was piled on the camp fire. The flames blazed high and the smoke curled skyward in the still, clear evening air. Harriet and Hazel were capering about the fire, holding an impromptu war dance. Tommy was standing near one corner of the tent watching the performance, when, thinking she had heard a sound behind her, she turned apprehensively.

For one horrified moment Tommy Thompson gazed, then with a yell of terror sprang for the tent.

"Thave me! Oh, thave me!" she screamed.

"What is it?" cried Harriet and Miss Elting, rushing toward her. Then they, too, halted,

gazing into the deepening shadows that enveloped the rear of the tent. Margery had caught sight of the object that had sent Tommy into an agony of terror. Margery had thrown herself headlong into the tent screaming wildly. Hazel, Miss Elting and Harriet stood their ground.

CHAPTER VI

THE CALL OF THE DANCING BEAR

"A BEAR! A bear! Thave me!" came Tommy's wailing voice from the interior of the tent.

"Be quiet!" commanded Miss Elting.

"It's on a chain. There are two men with it," said Harriet somewhat unsteadily.

Miss Elting stepped forward to obtain a better view of the two men. She saw the swarthy faces of two Italians. One was leading the bear by a chain, the other carried a long pole. The animal was a huge, ambling, cinnamon bear. He wore a muzzle, and the sight of this gave the woman and the two girls a greater sense of security.

"What do you wish here?" demanded the guardian.

"We maka da bear dance," said the man,

with the pole, touching his hat politely. "You giva mea twent-five cent I maka da bear dance."

"We do not wish to see the bear dance. You will please go away, or I shall call for assistance to drive you off," returned Miss Elting boldly.

"Oh, let the bear dance. It would be great fun," urged Hazel.

"Twent-five cent to maka da bear dance."

At this juncture Margery came timidly out of the tent. Tommy, white-faced, ready to run at the slightest sign of alarm, crept out after her.

"Will—will he bite?" stammered Margery.

"He will hurt his teeth on the muzzle if he does," answered Harriet Burrell laughingly.

The leader gave a sharp command. The bear rose on its hind feet and began pawing the air. It fixed its beady eyes on the face of Tommy Thompson. Tommy uttered a little cry and shrank back.

"He lika da littla girl," grinned the Italian.

"Never mind being personal. If you will keep your distance we will pay you a quarter to see the bear dance." Miss Elting drew a coin from her pocket, and stepping forward, without the least hesitation, handed it to the man with the pole. "Keep him over on that side of the fire. You two men remain over there

also. Remember, we are quite well prepared to assert our rights if you do not do as you are told. Watch that neither of them gets into the tent, Harriet," she added in a whisper.

Harriet Burrell nodded understandingly. The bear, in response to frequent prods of the pole, ambled about, dancing awkwardly, now and then uttering a growl of resentment at the treatment he was receiving. His master put the animal through its paces. At this juncture, Jane McCarthy, who, some time before, had driven off to a farm house in quest of milk for breakfast, drove in with a great rattle and honking. At first the Italians were for dragging their bear away. But, upon discovering that the newcomer was only another young woman, they grinned and went on with the performance.

"Hello! what have we here?" cried Jane. "Where did you catch that beast? Hey, you men! Didn't I pass you on the road this afternoon? Yes, I did. I recognize your friend, the bear. Better look out for those fellows. I don't like the looks of them," declared Crazy Jane to Miss Elting in a low voice. "I'd a heap sooner trust the bear than the men, and I wouldn't care to turn my back on either for very long at one time." Then turning to the men she said: "Make your bear do his tricks

over again. I haven't seen the show, you know."

"Twent-five cent," answered the man.

Jane looked at him for a few seconds, then, throwing back her head, laughed loudly.

"Twent-five cents, eh? I guess not! Does he dance, or does he not?" she demanded.

For answer the man with the pole gave the bear a vicious poke, the other led the animal to a small tree, to which he tied him.

"My gracious, are they going to camp here?" gasped Margery.

"Don't be afraid. We will send them on their way soon enough," answered Harriet in a low voice. "I wouldn't make them angry, Miss Elting."

"I don't intend to."

"Leave them to me. See here, men, what do you propose to do now?" demanded Jane briskly.

"We lika somathing to eat."

"All right. You shall have somathing. Twent-five cent please," mimicked Crazy Jane, holding out a hand. She was so droll about it that the girls burst out laughing.

"Oh, you shouldn't have done that. See, you have made them angry," whispered Hazel.

"I don't care if I have. I'll be getting angry myself, pretty soon—maybe."

"Hello! what have we here?" cried Jane.

"Shall I get something for them, Miss Elting?" questioned Harriet.

The guardian nodded. Harriet ran into the tent, where she quickly prepared some roast beef sandwiches. These she carried out and handed to the leader of the bear. He divided with his companion. The two men sat down by the fire and began eating voraciously.

"You gotta coffee?" asked the leader, his mouth so full of the sandwich he was eating that he was barely understandable.

"No. We have no coffee made," replied Miss Elting. "You will have to get along with what you have."

"You maka coffee. You maka now!"

"What?" cried Crazy Jane belligerently. "You order us to make coffee for you, you lazy good-for-nothings? Get out of here before I lose my temper with you."

"Easy, Jane!" warned Miss Elting.

"You no giva coffee, I letta out da bear," threatened the leader, scrambling up and running to the tree where the cinnamon bear was secured. The second Italian also had risen to his feet. He was edging toward the rear of the tent, evidently thinking that he was not observed. But Harriet, though not appearing to notice, was watching him narrowly. Tommy and Margery were trembling with fear. Har-

riet and Jane were unafraid. They were getting a little angry, however. Miss Elting slipped into the tent and getting her revolver, secreted it in a fold of her skirt. Just as she emerged the second Italian ducked in under the edge of the tent. The tent had been staked down firmly and as the man was somewhat stout he stuck when half way under the side wall.

"Come out of that," commanded Harriet.

Instead of obeying her the man tried to wriggle in.

"I see I've got to attack him from inside the tent," decided the girl, wheeling about she ran into the tent where, in the light from the campfire, she could see the tousled head and rolling black eyes of the man underneath the side wall. Without speaking she seized a pail of water that stood near the entrance of the tent and dashed it full into the man's face.

"Hurrah for Harriet!" cried Crazy Jane from the tent door, where she stood waving her arms, now and hopping about gleefully.

Choking and sputtering the man wriggled out from under the tent uttering a perfect torrent of abuse in his native tongue. It was about this time that Miss Elting discovered that she had forgotten to load the revolver before taking it from the tent. Meanwhile the leader had

untied the chain of the bear and was urging it forward, evidently intending to frighten the women.

"You giva me mon. I then-a go way with da bear. You giva me mon," he demanded angrily.

Tommy Thompson, at this juncture, found her courage. Snatching up a burning fire brand she charged the man leading the bear. He leaped back to avoid the thrust of the fiery club. The bear swung a giant paw at her. Tommy hit him over the nose with the firebrand. In the meantime Hazel Holland, following Harriet's example, appeared on the scene with another pail of water, which she dashed over the leader and the bear.

Fire and water were a little more than the man or the bear had bargained for, so they made haste to get out of the danger zone. Crazy Jane, in the meantime pursued them shouting and branishing a stout stick that she had picked up in the field. Jane chased the men all the way to the road, with Tommy and her fiery club in close pursuit.

"Oh, those rascals!" cried the guardian, when the girls returned. "And that miserable bear! I'll warrant the three of them got the fright of their lives. They won't bother the Meadow-Brook Girls soon again."

"I am not so certain of that," answered Harriet, smiling. "We did give them a scare, though. But I'm sorry I had almost to drown that one man. He was determined to get into the tent. What do you suppose he wanted?"

"To steal something, of course," answered Miss Elting.

"And Tommy. Did you see Tommy and her torch, girls? Oh, wasn't it a sight?"

"Yes. And Hazel and Harriet with their pails of water," chuckled the guardian.

"Tommy, dear," exclaimed Miss Elting, as the little girl sat down beside her, flushed and triumphant. "You have earned a bead this evening. I think each one of you is entitled to a bright red bead. Now pile on the wood, girls, so we shall have plenty of light. I don't apprehend further trouble, but it is well to be prepared."

"I will see to that," spoke up Harriet. "I have a plan that will make it unnecessary for any one to sit up and keep watch."

Harriet explained her plan, which met with the approval of the others. That plan was destined to fulfill its purpose later in the night, for their excitement was not yet ended, and before the dawning of another day, the Meadow-Brook Girls were once more to distinguish themselves.

CHAPTER VII

DISCOVERING MIDNIGHT PROWLERS

"HAVE you a ball of strong twine in your kit, Jane?" asked Harriet. "You told me to ask for anything I wanted but did not see."

"Sure, I have. In the tool box. Wait. I'll get it for you."

While Jane went for the twine, Harriet hurried out, returning a few moments later with two sticks, each stick being about five feet long. Next she got a tin pail and stood the pail bottom-side-up on the sticks. Her companions watched her wonderingly.

"What *are* you trying to do?" demanded Miss Elting.

"Fixing a burglar alarm. You'll agree that it is all right after I have it finished. Now, I want to run this twine all the way around the camp. I shall need some round sticks. Help me find some, Tommy. You have sharp eyes."

All hands set out to hunt for the desired sticks. Harriet began thrusting them into the soft ground at more or less regular intervals.

When the stakes had been placed loops of string were tied near the tops of them, and through these loops was threaded the long twine until the camp was entirely surrounded by it. It formed a thread-like barrier that seemed too slender a thing to be of much use. One end of the string was secured to the two sticks on which the pail had been placed. The slack in the string was taken up until the sticks and the pail tilted from the wall of the tent at a sharp angle.

"Hurrah!" cried the guardian. "That is a most ingenious contrivance. How did you come to think of it?"

"Nethethity ith the mother of invention, tho my father thayth," spoke up Grace.

Harriet nodded approvingly. The others laughed.

"Tommy is becoming quite a philosopher," averred the guardian. "Aren't you going to give us a demonstration of your invention, Harriet?"

"Very well," laughed Harriet. "Hazel, will you go out and stumble against the string? Don't you dare to break it for—Oh!"

The two sticks had come down with a crash, the tin pail rattling as it rolled over the floor. Tommy screamed and so did Margery.

"There's your demonstration," announced

Harriet. "Some one is coming. I hope it isn't those Italians again."

Miss Elting with her loaded revolver, Jane with her club, Harriet armed this time with a stout stick, sauntered forth to meet the newcomer. Jane had run to the dark side of the tent, thrusting her club across the corner ready to use it at the first indication of trouble. To her disgust, the farmer from whom she had obtained permission to make camp, now appeared on the scene.

"It's all right, girls. This is the gentleman who let us make camp here," called Jane.

"I just came over to tell you to take care of your fire. If it runs it'll burn off the meadow, it being all fresh seeding there. I wouldn't want to lose it," hailed their visitor.

"Thank you for calling our attention to it. We are always careful of fire," Miss Elting made reply.

"What was it I fell over when I came in here?" he asked, glancing about him. "You certainly look mighty comfortable here."

The girls looked at each other and giggled.

"It was a little contrivance of one of our young women, so that we might be warned of the approach of strangers," the guardian informed him. "You see, it warned us that some one was coming."

"I guess you can take care of yourselves, all right. Is there anything you want? If there is, come over to the house. My wife is curious to see this outfit. Maybe she will come over in the morning."

"Thank you very kindly for your interest," answered the guardian. "We shall be breaking camp early in the morning."

The farmer left. Harriet nodded to her companions.

"Was the demonstration satisfactory?" she questioned.

"I should say it was," answered Margery. "It nearly scared me out of my wits."

"I suppose we shall have to mend the string now. The farmer's big boots broke it in two places. However, we needn't worry about any person getting into this camp to-night without giving us warning of his approach," said Harriet. She repaired the broken "burglar alarm," then returning to the tent adjusted the sticks and the pail, placing several other pieces of tinware with it. The girls then gathered about the campfire, where they chatted, told stories and exchanged experiences until a late hour.

Harriet got out the map just before they retired. After consulting with Miss Elting for some time, it was decided that they should take a short cut across a rugged country, using their

compass to guide them, meeting Jane some twelve miles further on. She would have to drive more than twenty miles to make the point. The girls did not enjoy the highways very much. In the first place, the roads were dusty; many curious people were to be met with on the roads; then again they thoroughly enjoyed breaking new paths through the forests and over fields and hills. Now that all the crops had been garnered there was no danger of doing damage to the farmers' fields by tramping across them. Jane was instructed to wait for them after driving into the next town for fresh supplies.

"It's curious that we don't run across any melon fields. The first one I catch sight of I'm going to raid," she declared.

"No, Jane, you mustn't do that," objected the guardian. "What we get we must pay for."

"Certainly," agreed Jane. "But there isn't any sport in just walking up and paying for melons. It's a heap more fun to forage for them."

"But, Jane, think what it means to take an object of value that doesn't belong to you. It is stealing!"

"That's true. It surely is," agreed Jane. "I won't ever mention any such thing again."

"Thank you," returned Miss Elting with a smile that amply repaid Crazy Jane for her decision.

At last all hands began making preparations for bed. Folding cots were opened and made up, fresh fuel was heaped on the campfire, then Harriet and Miss Elting made a round of the camp to see that all was in shape for the night. Jane lighted the big headlights on her car, turning them on the darkest part of the camp, after which they drew the flap to the tent and began preparing for bed. Half an hour later the camp was silent, save for the occasional crackling of the fire. All the dead leaves and inflammable stuff had been raked away and the ground dug up immediately about the fire to prevent it from spreading. The moon now silvered the landscape, and a faint mist was rising from about the Willow Ponds, adding to the beauty of the night.

Midnight came, then the silence became more marked than before. About one o'clock in the morning two men might have been observed skulking about the farther side of the pond nearest to the camp. They took care not to come within range of the headlights of Crazy Jane's motor car. Had one looked closely at them the men might have been recognized as the same pair that had visited the camp with

the bear earlier in the evening. What their purpose was in returning could only be surmised.

It might be revenge or robbery. In either event it was bad enough, and the Meadow-Brook Girls, sleeping soundly, were blissfully unconscious of the danger that menaced them. Their faith in Harriet Burrell's burglar alarm permitted them to sleep without fear.

All at once there was a mighty crash in the tent. As Tommy Thompson described it afterwards, "it thounded ath if lightning had thtruck a tin thhop." The tin pail and the other kitchen utensils that had been hung on the long sticks in the tent came down with a clatter and a bang. The tin pail rolled clear across the tent, landed on Margery Brown, bringing from her a scream of terror.

"Quick! Put on your bathrobes!" called Miss Elting. "There is trouble here."

No need to tell them that. The tin pail already had conveyed this information to the Meadow-Brook Girls.

"Oh, thave me!" wailed Tommy.

Harriet was the first one to run outside the tent.

"There they are!" she cried, having caught sight of two skulking figures near the automobile. "It's the same Italians. Let's call for

help as loudly as we can. Perhaps that will make them take to their heels."

It had the desired effect. Seeing that the camp was fully aroused the intruders fled. Then a daring plan suggested itself to Crazy Jane McCarthy. Leaving her companions she started on a run for her car.

"Come back! Where are you going?" cried the guardian.

"I'll show you, I'll show them! Just watch and you'll see more fun than a barrel of monkeys eating cayenne pepper."

Dashing up to the car, she advanced the spark control, and gave the crank a quick turn. The car began a sputtering that quickly grew into a roar from the exhaust. Crazy Jane leaped in. She was clad in a bathrobe that reached to her ankles; her tangle of hair fell about her face and shoulders giving her face a wilder and more weird expression than ever.

Jane threw in the high speed lever. The car leaped forward. Harriet Burrell, who had divined something of Jane's purpose, made a running leap and landed on the step, grasping one of the cover braces for support.

"Jane, Jane! For goodness' sake, what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to give the rascals the scare of their lives. They haven't had enough. Get in!"

Harriet did so, but only to prevent being thrown off the car. She had little desire to participate in the drive that she well knew would be an exciting one. Miss Elting was shouting to Jane to come back. Jane did not or would not hear. Uttering a shrill little cry of triumph she drove the car ahead at a perilous rate of speed. Over the rough field the automobile lurched and careened imperiling the safety of its occupants and threatening momentarily to upset and wreck the car.

The two men were fleeing across the field. Seeing the car bearing down upon them, they began to dodge. The big white eyes of the headlights followed them wherever they went. It was maddening. Now the fugitives began zig-zagging. So did Crazy Jane. Once she nearly ran them down. The Italians sprang out of the way just in time and began running back toward the camp. Jane pursued them as soon as she could get the car turned about and facing the other way. By this time the men had gotten a long start.

"They're making for the camp, the villians," breathed Jane.

"It is because they are trying to get out of your way," answered Harriet almost breathlessly. "You will have to head them off."

"Head them off nothing!" exploded Jane.

"Rather will I take their heads off, the miserable rascals."

"Jane, Jane! You mustn't run them down. You simply *must not*. You might kill them. Please, please don't try to do that, dear!" begged Harriet.

"All right, darlin'. But you're making me lose a lot of fun. I don't get an opportunity like this every day in the week. They deserve all I can give them."

"You mustn't harm a human being, no matter how bad he is. There, they have turned toward the road."

"I wont hurt them," promised Jane. "I'll just scare them a little."

"Oh!" cried Harriet as the car rose on two wheels, nearly turning over. "Do be careful!"

"Don't be afraid. As long as I've got two wheels on the ground I'm all right. Now if I had only one wheel on the old sod you might worry, but you wouldn't worry for long. See 'em go. They know I've got them now!"

Just then the men plunged headlong into a ditch that extended all the way across the field. The girls had not discovered it until that moment. Jane checked her car just in time to prevent it also from going into the ditch.

"There's a bridge to the right," Harriet informed her, then was sorry she had made the

suggestion. Crazy Jane charged the bridge at full speed. All four wheels seemed to strike the planking at the same instant.

Jane turned sharply. They were now chasing the two men obliquely acros the field. The men were lagging.

"They're getting winded," shouted Crazy Jane triumphantly.

"Please go back now," begged Harriet. "You have frightened them enough. They never will trouble us again."

"Not till I get the wretches on a run down the road. I've not finished with them yet."

"They have nearly finished themselves," answered Harriet. She was no longer apprehensive that Jane would injure the men intentionally, though Harriet feared that one of them might stumble and be crushed underneath the car. Still her pulses were beating high, the color in her cheeks had mounted to her forehead. She was entering into the spirit of the wild chase almost with the enthusiasm of Crazy Jane herself.

The voices of their companions in the camp no longer reached them. The two girls were too far away to hear now, even had the car not been making such a din.

The two men were making for the roadside fence, a board structure, which in the haze of

the damp night, the girls did not see. They had forgotten that the fence was there.

All at once the men reached the fence. Grasping the top board they flung themselves over, landing heavily on the ground on the other side.

"Look out!" cried Harriet warningly.

"Hold fast!" yelled Jane.

Crash!

The car struck the fence with a mighty crash accompanied by the sound of splintering woodwork. The headlights went out, and Jane brought her car to a stop in the midst of the wreck at the roadside.

CHAPTER VIII

CAUGHT IN A MORASS

"WELL, here we are," announced Crazy Jane calmly.

"Oh, see those fellows run!" cried Harriet, gaspingly. "There they go!" she cried, in almost hysterical amusement, after she had picked herself up from the bottom of the car, where the collision had hurled her.

"I've a good notion to send the car straight through the fence, and chase that pair of skulkers out of the state!" Jane McCarthy proposed vindictively.

"Don't you try to do it," protested Harriet, now sobered by the realization of how reckless her companion might easily become. "Jane, *some day* you'll really hit some one—that would be awful!"

"But I didn't half frighten that pair of rascals," returned Jane.

"If the men weren't frightened, then they'll never know fear," insisted Harriet Burrell. "How badly is the car damaged?"

"A blow on the nose, but the nose is not even out of joint," Jane answered coolly.

"Then let us get back to Miss Elting. How she'll scold!"

Miss Elting did scold when they reached camp with the car. It is to be feared, however, that Jane heard but little of the rebuke, for she was busy examining the damage done to her beloved car. She found that she could put the lamps in condition again. The guard rod in front of the radiator was also injured. Jane decided that this could be easily fixed.

"Girls, girls! What do you mean by such actions. Jane, I am amazed at you. Harriet, how could you?" Miss Elting rebuked them roundly.

"I—I guess it was impulse," answered Harriet, her face crimsoning under the reproachful words of the guardian. "Please don't scold

us. We drove the men off. They will not trouble us again, I am quite sure."

"But they might have been run down, girls."

"Served them right if they had, bad luck to them!" retorted Jane mischievously. "However, 'all's well that ends well.' I'm for bed. What do you say?"

"Thay, why didn't you take me along?" demanded Tommy.

"It was quite bad enough without your assistance," replied the guardian. "Yes, we had better retire at once. Do you wish to put up your burglar alarm again, Harriet?"

"I do not think it will be necessary. The men won't prowl about the camp again tonight."

"No, they won't," agreed Jane, laughing uproariously. "They're running yet and they'll be running as long as their wind holds out. I wonder where they left the bear? Wouldn't it be fun if we could find the bear and let him loose?"

"Oh-h-h!" cried Margery. "How can you talk so, Jane?"

"Most certainly not," rebuked Miss Elting. "You have done quite enough as it is, without turning a bear loose on the community. You had better all go back to bed. What did you do to your car, Jane?"

"Bumped its nose, that's all. My only regret is that I didn't bump it against one of the Italians. I shouldn't have minded giving the bear a smash, too. Good night. Sweet dreams, darlin's!" Jane flounced into the tent and throwing off her bathrobe tumbled into bed, where she was soon sound asleep. The others did not quiet down quite so quickly. Harriet, especially, lay thinking over the experiences of the evening, and each time the thought of the pursuit of the Italians by Crazy Jane and her motor car occurred to her, Harriet would laugh softly to herself. She finally laughed herself to sleep, to be awakened in what seemed but a few moments later, by the blowing of a fish horn at the lips of Crazy Jane McCarthy. Day had dawned. The sun was just peeping over the eastern hills, the campfire was blazing and Miss Elting was getting breakfast.

Harriet quickly drew on her bathing suit, then, running out of the tent, plunged into the pond, uttering a little scream as the cold water enveloped her. None of the others had the courage to take a cold plunge that morning, as the air was rather cool. As for Harriet, she remained in the pond until Miss Elting insisted that she come ashore.

Camp was struck immediately after breakfast as the girls wished to make as much prog-

ress on their journey in the cool of the morning as possible. They struck camp with the skill of veterans, and within half an hour from the time they began the operation, everything was packed and stowed in the car.

"Now, don't you girls try to play me any more tricks to-day. I've got the food. If you don't find Jane, you get no supper. Understand?" laughed Jane.

"I've got thome bithcuit in my pack," piped Tommy.

"She won't have them for long," laughed Margery. "Tommy will have eaten the biscuits before she has gone a mile."

"Well, I don't eat tho much that I get fat," protested Tommy. "I gueth I know when to thtop."

Miss Elting was giving Jane final directions as to when and where to look for them, after which the four girls and their guardian, with their packs slung over their backs, stout sticks in their hands to assist them over rough places and also to frighten away troublesome dogs, started out on their journey of ten miles or more. They crossed the road traveled up a hill and headed straight across country. The unmarked trail was rough and following it fatigued them considerably during the first two miles of their journey.

Shortly after eleven o'clock they came in sight of a remote farm house tucked away in a valley. Miss Elting decided to call there to get some milk. The woman of the house at first regarded them with suspicion, but she soon thawed under Miss Elting's gentle voice and winning smile.

The milk had not been skimmed. All the old milk had been churned that day. There was nothing left but buttermilk, the woman told them.

"Buttermilk!" cried the girls in chorus.

"I jutht love buttermilk!" declared Tommy. "Do you have buttermilk cowth? Ithn't that fine? I'm going to make my father buy me a buttermilk cow."

"Well, I was going to feed that buttermilk to the hogs, but seeing as you want it I suppose you may have it," decided the woman with some reluctance. "Do you like it cold?"

The party answered in the affirmative. The housewife lowered a pail of buttermilk into the well to cool, the party sitting down under an apple tree in the yard to rest themselves in the meantime. Margery lay down and went to sleep. Tommy amused herself by tickling Buster's ear with a long, dead stalk of timothy grass. Margery in her sleep thought it a fly. She fought the fly for some time, then

finally opening her eyes, she caught Tommy red handed. Tommy fled into the farm house, where she pretended to be much interested in the housewife's work. She soon won her way into the good graces of the woman, and when, finally, the little lisping girl emerged from the house she was carrying a tin tray of food.

"Jutht thee what I've got," she cried. "It taketh Tommy Thompthon to get thingth to eat."

There were sandwiches, ginger cookies—great fat brown fellows—and a large dish of apple sauce.

"Oh, girls!" cried Margery her eyes glistening at the prospect of a feast. "I could die eating that food."

"Tommy, did you beg for this?" demanded the guardian.

"I gueth not. I jutht athked for it," returned Tommy calmly. "When you want thomething you want, jutht athk for it, and if you don't get it you haven't wasted anything but your breath."

"Madam, we are very grateful to you for this kindness, and will pay you before leaving," called Miss Elting to the housewife, who came out at this juncture to draw up the bucket of buttermilk from the cool depths of the well.

"You're welcome, I'm sure. I just baked

to-day. Hope the cookies are all right. They didn't rise to suit me."

"They'd have burthted if they'd rithen any more," observed Tommy. She was rebuked by a look from Harriet.

"I hope you like them," smiled the woman.

"Oh, they are simply delicious," answered Harriet, with glowing eyes. "And that buttermilk! I never drank any that tasted better."

The party ate their fill of the good things, Margery doing even more than her share in disposing of both buttermilk and food. When they had finished, the tray was empty. The woman offered to bring them more food, but Miss Elting said "no." She gave the woman fifty cents despite the protests of the latter; then, after a brief rest, they started on again, first having expressed their thanks to the housewife, who stood in the door of her home watching the little party until it had passed out of sight.

About the middle of the afternoon the girls halted for another rest because of Margery's complaints that she was feeling ill.

"You ate too much," declared Harriet. "It doesn't do to eat so much when one is taking exercise as we are."

"Yeth. Buthter alwayth eatth too much," averred Tommy wisely.

"Oh!" moaned Margery Brown, sitting down all in a heap. "I can't walk another step today."

"Do you think we should leave her here?" asked Harriet, with solemn face but twinkling eyes.

"We shall see how she feels after I have given her something to settle her stomach," answered Miss Elting gravely.

"No, no, no!" wailed Margery. "Don't leave me. I'll go. Let me lie still and rest myself a little first."

"You thee Buthter it doethn't pay to be tho greedy," admonished Tommy.

"Will you please make her stop?" begged Buster. "I can't stand it."

"Tommy!" rebuked Harriet. "Haven't you any consideration for Margery?"

"Yeth. Of courthe I have. But thhe doethn't detherve any thympathy."

"I'm ashamed of you, Tommy, dear. Wait. You, too, will be ill one of these days, then we shall make unpleasant remarks to you," warned Harriet.

Grace Thompson flushed guiltily.

"That ith too bad, Buthter. I didn't mean to make you feel worthe. Honetht I didn't. I hope you will be better pretty thoon." Tommy kissed her. "There. Ithn't that better?"

"Yes," admitted Margery. She already had taken some peppermint drops that Miss Elting had administered. After a further rest the girls assisted her to her feet and walked her slowly up and down the road. She was then permitted to sit down and rest again. Tommy, an expression of concern on her impish face, crouched before the now pale-faced Buster, munching a hard biscuit.

"Come, girls," said Miss Elting finally. "It is nearly five o'clock. We were to meet Jane at five, and we must have a good two hours' walk ahead of us still. Now that Margery is feeling so ill we shall not be able to make nearly as good time as that. I wonder if we hadn't better find the highway and finish the day's tramp on that?"

Margery protested that they must not change their plans on her account. She declared that she could walk as well as any of them.

"Margery will repent her rash assertions before she has gone a mile," laughed Hazel.

"No. I think she will be all right, now," replied the guardian. "Margery, if you find that you are feeling worse, at any time, you must be sure to tell me at once. Now, girls, march!"

The little company plodded along. Harriet linked one arm within Margery's. The latter, while feeling much improved, was still a little

weak and Harriet Burrell's sturdy arm was appreciated.

About six o'clock they came to a long hill that sloped gently down into a valley. The greater part of the valley was covered with trees. It appeared to be a dense forest of second growth, the trees not being very large. The guardian consulted the map.

"Yes. We are on the right trail. We must keep straight on through the woods. According to this map there should be a trail that leads directly to the other side of the valley, and when we reach that point we shall have finished our day's journey."

"I am afraid we are going to be caught in the dark, Miss Elting," said Harriet.

"If we find the trail we do not need to worry about that. We can't very well go astray. I would suggest that, when we get down farther into the valley, we spread out and look for the wood trail. The one who first discovers it will shout. By taking this open formation we shall be saving time. It certainly seems to me that the distance to be covered to-day is more than ten miles."

"It does seem so," agreed Hazel. "But we have lost considerable time on the way."

They began spreading out when about half way down the hill, calling to each other good-

naturedly, shouting as they got farther and farther away. Tommy discovered the road. She ran out into the field waving her arms and crying shrilly to attract the attention of her companions. They hurried toward her. The road, as they soon learned, was a mere path and one not much frequented at that, as was evidenced by the vegetation that grew in the middle of it.

"This looks to me like rather low swampy land," declared Harriet. "It is my idea that we had better stick closely to the path, or we may get into trouble." She did not say definitely what she feared, not wishing to needlessly terrorize Margery and Tommy. Miss Elting understood their danger, however. She nodded. Harriet started along the trail, leading the way, with the guardian following at her heels. They went on in this way for half an hour. The forest grew darker as they proceeded, the vegetation being thick in there. The day was waning rapidly. It was not very long before they were groping their way, rather than finding it by sight.

A scream from Margery, who was at the rear, brought them up sharply. Then Tommy's voice was raised in a sharp cry of alarm.

"What is it?" shouted Harriet.

"I'm sinking!" screamed Margery.

Harriet instantly knew the meaning of this. Her worst fears were confirmed. They were in the middle of a vast morass that stretched on each side of the trail.

"Thave me! Oh, thave me!" wailed Tommy.

Both girls were in the mud, but just how deeply Harriet Burrell did not know. Now Hazel added her cries to those of Tommy and Margery. She, too, had stepped off the path. Harriet could hear Hazel floundering in the mire. Miss Elting hurried back to them, regardless of her own safety.

"Be careful!" called Harriet warningly, groping her way to her companions who were crying and screaming for help.

CHAPTER IX

THE TRAMP CLUB TO THE RESCUE

"LOOK out, Miss Elting," warned Harriet again. "The girls are in the mud."

"So am I," cried the guardian in a voice of alarm. "Oh, it's deep. I'm sinking."

"Stand perfectly still," advised Harriet. "You will get in deeper if you struggle. I'll see what I can do. I may get in, too."

"Be quick, Harriet," urged the guardian. "This is serious. I can't move an inch."

"I'll do the best I can. Oh, I wish I had some good sized limbs of trees to throw to you. Here's one. Where are you, Miss Elting?"

"Here. It's no use. I can't pull myself out."

Margery was screaming at the top of her voice. It seemed as though her cries must be heard throughout the woods. No amount of urging could induce her to be quiet.

"Let her yell. Let her make all the noithe she can. Maybe thomebody will hear her," wailed Tommy.

This was good logic. Miss Elting told Buster to shout as loudly as she could. The other girls now added their voices to Buster's frantic screams. Harriet was moving about as rapidly as she dared, but she was unable to find any limbs large enough to be of much use to Miss Elting, who was nearest to the trail over which they had come. Harriet tried another experiment. Breaking down a sapling that grew beside the path she thrust this toward the guardian.

"Take hold of it," she commanded. "Have you got it, Miss Elting?"

"Yes."

"Give way loosely when I pull. I may be able to pull you out. Don't resist at all."

"It's no use, Harriet!" announced the guard-

ian, after several minutes of the hardest sort of work on Harriet's part. "I am getting deeper in the mud with every move I make. You will have to think of something else."

"Girls, stop your screaming for a moment," called Harriet. "Tell me how you are? Are you sinking deeper into the mud or are you remaining about the same?"

"Whenever I make the slightest movement I sink in deeper. I'm keeping as still as possible," answered Hazel.

"I'm in almotht up to my waitht," cried Tommy. "I'm going to be buried alive. Oh, thave me!"

"As long as you are able to scream like that you are all right," comforted Harriet. "When you stop yelling I shall begin to believe you are in real trouble."

Harriet now set to work cutting down small saplings with her hatchet. These she threw out into the space between Miss Elting and the three girls. They were close together, which somewhat simplified the work. The Meadow-Brook girl knew that it would take a quantity of the small trees and limbs to support her weight, but it was the only course she knew of to follow. Fortunately for Harriet she was an athletic girl, possessing great strength for one of her age and build. Better still, she pos-

sessed a courage and will all her own. Then, too, Harriet Burrell was one of those doggedly determined persons who never know when they are worsted. Her mind was working even more rapidly than were her hands. She had succeeded in piling up enough stuff to form a slight support for the arms of her companions. She now explained her plan to them.

"I don't think I shall be able to get you out of the morass without taking a long chance of getting in myself," she began.

"Oh-h-h-h!" cried the girls despairingly. They had relied implicitly on Harriet's resourceful brain to find the means to release them from their dangerous predicament.

"Wait until I have finished. You know that I'm not afraid. You know better than to think so," soothed Harriet. "Don't you see, if I were to get caught in the mud, your last hope would be gone? We might all perish here before any one found us."

"You are right as usual, Harriet," said Miss Elting. She was apparently calm. If she were nervous no trace of it was discoverable in her voice. "What do you propose to do?"

"I am going to pile some more stuff on what I have already placed there. Each of you is to throw out her arms and if possible lock hands across the barrier. When one hand gets tired

change to the other one. That will keep you from sinking down much deeper. The saplings should keep you up, though it will be a rather severe strain on your arm."

"What will you do, Harriet?" asked Miss Elting.

"I am going for help."

"Oh, don't leave uth!" wailed Grace.

"Harriet is right," agreed Hazel. "It is the only thing to do. But which way will you go?"

"I will go back the way we came. I believe that if I am careful I shall be able to reach solid ground without getting off the trail. A short distance from here the ground rises somewhat and is harder. Once I reach that I shall be safe."

"But, Harriet, where will you go for help?"

"I saw the top of some farm buildings to the west of where we were just before we entered this horrid place. I think it will be best for me to hurry there. I ought to be back in a couple of hours at the outside."

"Two *hourth!*" mourned Tommy.

"That will be better than staying there all night, won't it?" demanded Harriet.

"I should say it will," agreed Hazel.

"Then hurry, dear," urged Miss Elting.

"Is any one of you in pain?" questioned Harriet.

"I think not," replied Miss Elting. "The ground is too soft to hurt. That's the worst of it. If the ground weren't so soft and sticky we should be able to get out. Do you think you could build a fire before you go, Harriet?"

"I wouldn't dare to do so. Suppose it should spread to the trees about you after I had gone? There are cedars and small pine trees in here. The foliage of these trees is like tinder."

"You are right!" exclaimed the guardian. "To build a fire would be the height of folly. Hurry, please. We will be here when you come back," she added with a forced laugh.

"Be brave, girls. Remember, we are Meadow-Brook Girls," said Harriet, as with a shouted "good-bye" she started back along the trail on her mission. Both arms were outspread so that she might be warned by touch when getting too close to the sides of the trail.

"Girls," began Miss Elting brightly, after Harriet had left them. "Harriet reminded us that we are Meadow-Brook Girls. Let's show that we are by giving the Meadow-Brook yell. Now. One, two, three, go!"

"Meadow-Brook. Meadow-Brook.
Rah, rah, rah!
Meadow-Brook, Meadow-Brook,
Sis, boom, ah-h-h!"

The girls' voices grew stronger after the second line. The voices of Miss Elting and Tommy Thompson rose above those of the other two. Some one laughed. It was Tommy. Her laugh was a trifle hysterical, but it was a laugh, and for the moment it relieved the strain somewhat. Miss Elting gave them no time to think about themselves.

"Girls. Forty-Nine Blue Bottles now," she cried, then began the chant herself, the others joining in promptly.

"Forty-nine blue bottles were hanging on the wall,
Forty-nine blue bottles were hanging on the wall.
Take one of the bottles down and there'll be forty-eight
blue bottles a hanging on the wall, a hanging on the
wall."

They continued to chant regardless of aching throats and hoarse voices, until every one of those offending blue bottles had been removed from the wall.

"Now the Meadow-Brook yell again. It will bring assistance to us if any one hears it," reminded the guardian. They repeated the yell.

"Gracious!" cried Miss Elting.

"Oh, what is it now?" begged Margery, in a frightened voice.

"Why, some malicious person has put all those forty-nine blue bottles back on the wall again. What shall we do?"

"I gueth we'll have to take them off," lisped Tommy, amid laughter from her companions and the guardian as well.

"I can't," moaned Margery. She began to choke and cough. "I've swallowed a bug."

"Oh, the poor bug. I'm tho thorry for him," piped Tommy.

"Maybe we can catch him in one of those bottles," suggested Miss Elting. "Come, girls, you aren't going to desert me now, are you? Already! 'Forty-nine blue bottles were hanging on the wall.'"

Once more the girls went over the familiar refrain, ending finally with the Meadow-Brook yell. Again and again did they take the bottles from the wall, but as often as they removed them invisible hands replaced every one of the forty-nine blue bottles in their accustomed position on the wall.

For the tenth time the forty-nine blue bottles had been taken down and hung up again. The voices of the girls were so hoarse that they could barely speak aloud, though they were laughing hysterically as they labored with the forty-ninth. They had almost forgotten that they were in danger, forgotten their aching bodies, forgotten that Harriet Burrell was speeding through the darkness in quest of assistance, when a distant but familiar cry

reached their ears. It was the long drawn out "hoo-e-e-e-e" of the Meadow-Brook Girls.

Miss Elting heard it first. Her companions were laughing so immoderately that they failed to hear it the first time. The guardian's voice failed her. A lump rose in her throat. The strain had been so great that several times she found herself on the point of giving way. Now the reaction had set in.

"Hoo-e-e-e-e!"

Tommy heard it, and uttered a scream. The call was repeated. This time all the girls heard it plainly.

"It's Harriet, it's Harriet!" cried Hazel.

"Yes. Rescue is at hand," replied Miss Elting fervently.

A light twinkled far away through between the trees. It seemed to the anxious eyes of the guardian as though it were miles and miles distant. She raised her voice in a shout, but the voice was so weak that it carried but a short distance.

"Shout, girls!" she begged. "You may be able to make them hear. I can't. My voice has completely left me. Tommy! You can always scream. Do so now."

Tommy let loose a thrilling, penetrating yell. The rescue party heard it. They answered with return shouts in male voices.

"That sounds to me like boys' voices," cried Miss Elting huskily.

"Oh, thave me!" wailed Tommy. "My hair ith all tumbled down, my frock ith muddy from top to bottom and my fathe ith thmudged. I'm a thight, I know I am. I can't retheive company to-day. Thend them away, pleathe."

Some one came running toward them considerably in advance of the light.

"Girls! Girls!" shouted an anxious voice.

"Here!" cried the guardian.

"Thank goodness you're alive," answered Harriet Burrell. "I've been terribly anxious about you. Here—here's a can of fresh water. I know your throats must be dry."

Reaching forward, Harriet handed the can to the guardian. Miss Elting passed it on to Tommy. Each of the girls drank.

"Where are you, folks?" shouted a boyish voice.

"Here. Just ahead of you," answered Harriet. She had sunk down on the trail, her strength gone. A moment later she was on her feet again, hurrying down the trail to guide the rescuers to the spot.

A tall young fellow clad in khaki, a campaign hat on his head, rushed up. Behind him came half a dozen other young men similarly clad. They were bearing fence rails on their should-

ers, fairly staggering under the weight of their burdens.

"Oh, I'm so glad!" cried Miss Elting, now on the verge of tears after the strain. "Who are they, Harriet, my brave girl?"

"We're the Tramp Club," answered the first boy. "We'll introduce ourselves after we get you girls out of the morass. You're in a fine mess and you certainly do need help."

CHAPTER X

IN THE HANDS OF THE RESCUERS

"NOW, keep perfectly quiet. Don't move an inch. We'll have you out of it in a few moments. Here, Dill, give me the rope. Now the end of a rail. The young lady over there with the flaxen hair——"

"It ithn't flaxen. It ith blonde," protested Tommy indignantly.

"I stand corrected," laughed the young man. "Please grab the rope and pull on it. I don't dare throw a rail out there for fear of hitting one of you. Being the farthest out, you will be able to pull the rail right up to you. Never mind if you do settle down an inch or two. I'll have you out at any rate. Do you understand?"

"Yeth."

"Then here goes." The boy tossed a coil of rope so accurately that the coil dropped directly over Grace Thompson's head. She uttered a little scream as the rope slipped over her head, then clawed frantically at it. "That's right," cried her rescuer. "Now pull."

Tommy pulled desperately drawing the rail towards her, but sinking deeper and deeper into the mud until she was nearly up to her armpits. The little lisping girl took fresh alarm. She began to cry, "Thave me!"

"Don't be frightened. Here's another rail!" encouraged the youth. "We've got to build up a bridge. Those limbs and saplings you have out there will make an excellent foundation. Hurry them up here, Dill! The young ladies will grow impatient and refuse to wait for us longer."

The girls declined to laugh at this pleasantry. They were in too much distress. Harriet stood holding a lantern above her head so that the boys might see to work to the best advantage. The rails were drawn out by Tommy in each instance, assisted by the girls between herself and the path. Then the leader set his boys at work felling the largest trees they could find along the trail. The lads went at their work with a will. As soon as the trees and brush

were cut down they were carried over and dumped in on the rail and brush foundation, forming a rude bridge. The leader then advanced cautiously over it until he reached a point near to the guardian and the girls.

"Now we will see what we can do."

A rope was passed about the waist of the guardian despite her protests that the others should be gotten out of the morass first. Three boys were put at the shore end of the rope with orders to pull when their leader gave the word. He, on his part, took firm hold of Miss Elting under the arms, then shouted "now!"

Those on shore began to pull. The leader, at the same time, began to lift with all his might, moving the guardian's shoulders from left to right.

"Tell me if the rope hurts you," gasped the muscular young fellow.

Miss Elting came up so suddenly that her rescuer fell over, narrowly escaping a plunge into the morass. The guardian was finally dragged to the path. The rescuers then turned their attention to the other girls. Their wooden raft was slowly sinking under the weight that had been put upon it, but fresh stuff was being constantly piled on it to keep it above the mud. One by one the Meadow-Brook Girls were hauled out.

Harriet had helped Miss Elting aside into the shadows, where she assisted the guardian in scraping the mud from her clothing. At first Miss Elting was barely able to stand. She found herself trembling from head to foot now that the strain, mental and physical, was removed.

"Here's another one!" cried the cheery voice of the leader.

"What wonderful boys!" breathed Miss Elting, starting to go to Tommy's assistance.

"Please lie down on the ground and rest, Miss Elting. Don't try to get up until we are ready to start. I can take care of the others as they are dragged out," directed Harriet.

She assisted Tommy to a place beside Miss Elting, the latter insisting upon trying to help the unfortunate and humiliated Tommy in her distressing condition.

"I withh I had thome clotheth fit to be theen," complained the little girl. "Thith dreth ith a thight."

"Be thankful that you are alive," answered Harriet sharply.

"We should have perished, had it not been for you," answered the guardian.

"Considering that I was the only one who didn't get into the mud, I simply had to be the one to go for help. I don't deserve any credit,"

flung back Harriet, hurrying over to assist the suffering Buster. After Buster, came Hazel, the last to be rescued.

"Have we got them all?" questioned the young man.

"Yes, thank goodness," answered Harriet.

"We are under great obligations to you, young gentlemen. We are in no condition to properly express our appreciation this evening. I hope we may have an opportunity to do so in the morning," said Miss Elting.

"We are very glad to have been able to help you. We needed a little exercise," laughed the young man. "Yes, we shall see you again, but we haven't finished our work yet. What do you say? Shall we fix up some litters and carry the young ladies out?"

"I don't know. We shall see in a few moments. Give them a chance to rest. They are completely exhausted."

"Certainly. We fellows are going on ahead to examine this path. We'll return presently."

The boys trudged off down the trail.

"We shan't go far," called back the leader, then strode off after his companions. Harriet and Miss Elting made the girls as comfortable and presentable as possible, though it was apparent that both girls and clothes needed a thorough scrubbing.

"I don't know how we are going to reach camp," pondered the guardian, while waiting for Grace, Margery and Hazel to rest.

'Oh, I forgot to tell you," exclaimed Harriet; "Jane met these boys this afternoon. Two of them are acquaintances of hers. They are high school boys from the town of Proctor. Like ourselves they are out on a long tramp, and they are camped right near where we are to camp for the night. They assisted Jane to put up the camp and get everything in order. Then, when night came, Jane began to grow worried. She declared that something had happened to us. One of the boys wanted to know which way we were to come and Jane told them."

" 'Then they have gotten into the swamp and they're in trouble,' " declared one of the boys. It seems that these boys passed through here yesterday, and two of them got into the morass in broad daylight. No wonder we floundered into it trying to get through there in the dark. Of course Jane was wild with anxiety. She said they must help her find us. This they were willing and glad to do. They decided to come to this end of the swamp and begin their search from the point where we were supposed to have entered."

"Did you meet them?" interrupted Miss Elting.

"Yes. Jane rushed them, in her car, to the nearest point on the road, then ran across the field with them to the place where we took the swamp trail. I met them just as I came out into the field. Jane was wild with delight, then she cried when I told her where you were. She wanted to come here with me. I told her to hurry back to camp and prepare hot water, get everything ready, then come for us. She will be back long before we get out of the swamp I think. The boys told me all that I have told you, as we were hurrying in here. It is very fortunate for us that we met them," declared Harriet in a matter-of-fact tone.

"I think you are a very brave and resourceful girl, Harriet. You will get some honor beads for this. Girls, shall we sing 'Forty-nine Blue Bottles' now?" questioned Miss Elting quizzically.

"No!" shouted Tommy, so loudly that the Tramp Club, who had gone a short distance down the trail, heard and thought that the girls were calling them back.

"Did you call us?" hailed the leader, running back toward the girls.

"No," returned Miss Elting. "We are all right, thank you."

The boys continued on down the trail. Half an hour later they returned to find the girls

somewhat rested and ready to proceed on their journey.

"Do you think you feel strong enough to go on?" asked the leader of the Tramp Club solicitously.

"Yes," replied Miss Elting. "We are anxious to meet Jane and get settled for the night. You have not told us yet to whom we are indebted for our rescue."

"My name is George Baker. I'm the captain of the Tramp Club. They're a [illegible] lot of fellows, but full of mischief."

"As I said before, we haven't words with which to express our gratitude to you for what you have done for us," said Miss Elting. "Ah! There are your friends. Won't you introduce us to them? I'll first introduce my Meadow-Brook Girls." Miss Elting introduced the girls to the Tramp Club as a body, after which the captain did the same with his friends. The names of the members of the club as given by the captain in his introduction, were Dill Dodd, Fred Avery, Sam Crocker, Charles Mabie, Will Burgess and Davy Dockrill.

"Taken altogether, ladies," remarked the captain, "we are a choice band of ruffians on the road, though sometimes gentlemen when we are at home."

"I disagree with you," laughed the guardian.

"I shall never meet any finer gentlemen than I have met to-night."

The captain doffed his hat. Tommy was regarding him out of the corners of her eyes. She seemed about to say something; then, apparently changing her mind, smiled impishly to herself and remained silent.

"I told your friend, Miss McCarthy, to set the boys at work getting things ready for the ladies when they reached camp," said the captain. "My, but I got some thrills riding out here with Miss McCarthy. We must have driven out here at the rate of about a hundred miles an hour. I never before rode so fast in my life. Here, fellows, what's the matter with you? This is no marathon. The young ladies can't hit up that pace and keep on their feet. Slow down."

"We can walk jutht ath fatht ath any boy in bootth," retorted Tommy indignantly.

Captain Baker touched the rim of his hat.

"I'll argue it out with you some other time, Miss Thompson," he said.

"Oh!" moaned Margery, staggering a little.

The head tramp immediately sprang to Margery's assistance. "Let me help you," he insisted, taking Margery by the arm. Miss Elting stepped up on the other side of Margery, taking the latter's free arm.

"Now, you will be all right, dear," encouraged the guardian.

Harriet, in the meantime, was assisting Tommy along. The boys ahead began to sing. In this way the party followed the trail out to the field. The girls breathed sighs of relief as they emerged into the open.

Just then, out of the darkness, rushed a figure, throwing itself upon Tommy and Harriet.

"Oh, you dear girls!" cried Jane, flinging an arm about the neck of each. "I nearly cried my eyes out over you. But, when the boys started out to find you, I knew it would be all right. Everything is ready for you. Nice warm baths, and there will be a pot of hot coffee for you. I'll whisk you to camp in short order."

"Never mind the whisking," spoke up the guardian. "Captain Baker has told us about your whisking him out here this evening."

Jane threw back her head and laughed.

"How about going back? I'll tell you what, boys. I'll take the girls and one of you, then I'll come back and get the rest."

"No thank you, we will walk it," answered the chief tramp promptly.

"Never," insisted Jane. "You come with us, young man. I'll be back here in half an hour for the rest of these brave boys."

The captain declined to desert his men. Jane therefore urged him no further. The boys assisted in helping the Meadow-Brook Girls into the car, then Jane drove away at a rapid rate. She let the girls out at their camp, located in a very pretty and now moonlit valley.

"You'll find everything ready. I'm going back for those unruly boys," Jane announced, turning her car about and racing back over the road, her hair streaming over one shoulder, her eyes sparkling with the excitement of it all. The tramps had another lively ride to camp. Jane did not spare them. She took an almost savage delight in trying to frighten them, but did not succeed very well in this attempt. If they were afraid they failed to show it.

On reaching camp the tired wayfarers lost no time in making for their tent where hot water for their baths awaited them. By the time Jane returned with the members of the Tramp Club the Meadow-Brook Girls, clad in dry, fresh clothing, were ready to receive their guests. They presented a wholly different appearance, now, and the boys gazed at them admiringly.

"Jane, the boys must join us at supper," declared Miss Elting.

George shook his head.

"There are too many of us. We'll eat you out of house and home."

"There's lots more stuff to eat in the automobile," declared Jane hospitably. "You wait till I unload the real supplies."

She dragged out a hamper. It was filled with good things to eat, and what particularly pleased the boys, was the unexpected invitation to eat with their new found friends.

Though the girls were tired and exhausted from their trying experiences in the swamp, it proved a happy evening. It was decided to remain in camp all next day to rest. Strangely enough Captain Baker announced that they too had already concluded that they needed a rest. He said they would do some foraging next day, and bring the girls some good things to eat to pay them back for what they had eaten and for the exciting ride Jane had given them.

Miss Elting smiled knowingly. The tramps appeared to be gentlemanly boys, however "full of mischief" they might be.

It was ten o'clock when the Tramp Club said good night and set out for their own camp.

"Now, children, go to bed at once," directed the guardian. "We have had excitement enough for one day at least."

The girls agreed with her, and half an hour later the camp had settled down for the night.

CHAPTER XI

A CONTEST OF ENDURANCE

"FORTY-NINE blue bottleth were hanging on the wall," muttered Tommy in her sleep, as Miss Elting and Harriet stepped into their tent at eight o'clock the next morning, after having finished their inspection of the camp. The rest of the Meadow-Brook Girls were still sleeping soundly.

"Poor Tommy," smiled the guardian.

"What is Tommy muttering about forty-nine blue bottles?" questioned Harriet.

The guardian laughed merrily.

"I had the girls say that doggerel about the forty-nine blue bottles while we were stuck fast in the mud. You see, I wished to keep their minds from their troubles. We repeated the song until we were so hoarse we could scarcely speak."

"I noticed that when I returned, but thought you had all caught cold. So it was forty-nine blue bottles that made you so hoarse," laughed Harriet. "I think you deserve the real credit of the rescue. Had you not done what you did to keep up the spirits of the girls there might have been a different ending," declared Har-

riet Burrell with emphasis. She kissed the guardian impulsively, then stepping softly, to avoid waking her sleeping companions, she made her way outside the tent. Shading her eyes and gazing about she finally discovered a brown-clad figure sitting on a fence. He evidently was observing the camp, for, when he caught sight of Harriet, he waved his hand.

"I'll wager that's Captain Baker," smiled Harriet, waving back to him. "He is a peculiar young man. We are under great obligations to them all, but those boys think girls are of no account. We are going to clash with them. I know we are."

Harriet poked the fire and built it up until a cloud of smoke was ascending skyward. It was not a skilfully made fire, but Harriet had a purpose in making a great smudge that morning. She wished to show the tramps that the girls had just gotten up and were not yet ready to receive company. She had construed Captain Baker's action in watching the camp as being for the purpose of learning when the Meadow-Brook outfit was ready to see them. As the girl cast frequent glances across the fields she saw the other members of the Tramp Club scattered about not far from their own camp, though all of the boys kept a respectful distance from the camp occupied by the girls.

Breakfast was out of the way and the camp of the Meadow-Brook Girls put to rights by ten o'clock. The travelers felt somewhat lame and stiff after their experience in the swamp. Tommy walked with a distinct limp, which Harriet accused her of putting on for effect.

"I'm not pretending," protested Tommy indignantly. "I gueth you would walk like I do if you had been fatht in the mud motht all night."

Harriet laughed good-naturedly.

A halloo out back of the camp cut short any further argument. It was Captain Baker with his fellow "tramps."

"Is it too early in the morning to make our party call?" shouted George.

"No. Come right along," called Harriet cordially. "We got up rather late this morning. Didn't I see you sitting on the fence off yonder?"

"Yes, I was watching for a woodchuck to come out. Fellows, you've all met Miss Burrell, I think. And Miss Thompson."

"Yeth I met them in the thwamp," lisped Tommy.

Miss Elting came out her face wearing a radiant smile of welcome for the tramps. Their hats were off instantly. She insisted on shaking hands with each of the boys in turn.

"I suppose you have had your breakfast?" smiled the guardian.

"Breakfast!" exclaimed Davy Dockrill. "Yes. We men eat our breakfast at six o'clock. We aren't like girls, who take their breakfast in place of luncheon."

"And eat cookies between meals," laughed Harriet. "How many miles do you walk a day?"

"Oh, a lot," answered George airily.

"How many?" persisted Harriet.

"Well, maybe ten, fifteen, twenty miles, maybe more."

"I'll wager that you take a ride now and then," interjected Tommy.

"We don't. We walk, I tell you."

"We aren't like girls, who have to stop and rest every half mile or so," declared Will Burgess.

"And get stuck in the mud," laughed Fred Avery.

"That'll be about all, boys," reproved Captain Baker, frowning. "I told you these boys were full of mischief. But you mustn't mind them," he added apologetically.

"Oh, we don't mind them at all," smiled Harriet.

"When are you going to start out again?"

"Not until some time to-morrow morning,"

answered Miss Elting. "We are all a little lame and tired to-day."

The captain nodded gravely.

"Yes; girls can't stand as much as boys when it comes to hard work like a week or so of walking," he said with an air of conviction.

"Yeth they can," resented Tommy. "Girlth can walk jutht ath far in a day ath boyth can."

"You've got to show us before we can believe that," declared Davy.

"Very well; we will show you," answered Harriet quietly. "Name your conditions."

"Do you mean it?" questioned George.

"Of course I mean it."

"You're plucky, all right," he said regarding her admiringly. "But I don't like to have a contest with girls."

"Why not? Are you afraid of them?" demanded Margery.

The boy flushed.

"No, ma'am. It isn't manly, that's all."

"You mean it wouldn't be manly to be beaten by girls, eh?" suggested Harriet.

"Well, yes, I suppose that's what I mean."

"Oh, very well. If you wish to back out, why, of course——"

"Back out? I guess not!" exclaimed Sam. "We'll walk your heads off, if you say the word."

"Oh, mercy, no," protested Harriet, laughingly. "I hope you will not do anything so terrible as that. You haven't said what the conditions are to be. We must have some rules if we are to have a hiking contest. They have rules even in a walking contest, I understand."

Captain Baker pondered a moment.

"I don't know about rules. I think it will have to be a go-as-you-please contest."

"We are willing to abide by whatever you say," replied Harriet.

"Where do you go to-morrow? I mean where do you make your next camp?"

Harriet consulted their map.

"We are going to try to make Hunt's Corners," she said, scrutinizing the map.

"May I see that map?" asked Davy.

"I don't think it would be quite fair," answered Harriet brightly. "You see, our route is marked out on the map. Were I to show it to you, you would know which way we are going. That would give you an advantage. I will show the map to you some other time."

"Of course it would be unfair. We don't want to see the map, Davy," rebuked George. "How far is it to Hunt's Corners?"

"Ten or twelve miles."

"Don't let that trouble you, boys. I'll be on hand with the car and I'll pick up the strag-

glers," interjected Jane, joining the group. She had been at work cleaning her car. Her face was smudged and her hands blackened. "If any of you get tired out I'll promise to take care of you."

"Thank you," answered the captain, flushing. His companions laughed at him.

"But, Captain," protested Harriet, "we haven't decided on anything. Is this to be a race for one day, or for all the way home? You go right through Meadow-Brook, do you not?"

"Yes. Just as you say. I don't think you can stand it to race all the way home."

"Perhaps not," answered Harriet dryly.

"No. The poor, delicate things," mourned Jane. "Just think how you are going to walk them to death. You boys should be ashamed of yourselves."

"I don't care if the girls don't," laughed George. "Yes. We'll walk you all the way in to Meadow-Brook. The party that gets in first must give the other side something. What'll it be?" asked George.

"I'll take marthhmallowth for mine," piped Tommy.

"That's it. A box of candy for each of you if you win. What do you say, fellows?" questioned George, appealing to his companions.

They nodded, smiling acquiescence.

"Suppose we give each of you a handkerchief if you win," smiled Harriet.

"It's a go," declared Captain George.

"Then I propose this. Each party is to go as it chooses. The one that gets in first wins," suggested Harriet.

"Are tricks barred?" demanded Sam.

"I don't know what you mean by tricks. Strategy isn't," returned Harriet.

"Whew! That's a big word," exclaimed Dill.

"Neither party is to ride, you know," spoke up George, eyeing them suspiciously.

"Certainly not," answered Harriet. "We shouldn't do such a dishonest thing."

"I beg your pardon. Of course not. You girls have a car and, perhaps, you might think it amusing to work a trick on us."

"Our Meadow-Brook Girls aren't that kind, Mr. Baker," interposed Miss Elting severely.

"Ride? You couldn't drag them into the car," declared Jane.

"By the way, young men, have you seen anything of two Italians and a bear?" asked Miss Elting.

"Yes. We met them two days ago," answered the captain. "Why?"

"We had some difficulty with them; that's all."

"I wish we had known that." The captain's lips compressed, a frown appearing on his forehead. "What did they do?"

Miss Elting told the boys the whole story. How the boys did laugh when the guardian described how Jane had chased the Italians about the field with her car!

"We will keep out of the road when you are abroad, Miss McCarthy," said George. "I don't believe you are a safe person to be allowed on the highway."

"You are right, she isn't," nodded Miss Elting. "Well, have you settled your plans for the contest?"

"All the plans we can make. We are to walk to Meadow-Brook. Neither party should actually walk more than ten hours a day——"

"My goodneth," interrupted Tommy. "Ten hourth a day. Thave me!"

Captain Baker smiled a superior smile and nodded to his companions.

"Oh, no. We shouldn't want to wear you out to that extent," replied Harriet mildly.

"In the meantime we wish you to come to supper with us this evening," invited Miss Elting. "We will show you that Meadow-Brook Girls can cook as well as walk. We shan't promise you much of a variety, but there will be plenty to eat. That will give you new

strength for the coming contest," she added, with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes.

The captain accepted the invitation for his friends. He offered to bring over some provisions and some milk. Jane replied that she had arranged for the milk, which she was to go after in her car. It was decided that the boys need bring nothing with them, there being enough in camp for all. The Tramp Club went away, to return at about half past five in the afternoon.

The young men had become very much interested in the Meadow-Brook Girls. As Captain Baker characterized them, "They aren't the helpless, fainting kind. Those girls know how to take care of themselves. Now, what do you think of their fighting off two Italians and a bear? Fellows, we've got to hike some to beat them! They've got something in the back of their heads that we don't know about."

"Pshaw! We can walk them off the earth," scoffed Sam.

CHAPTER XII

MEADOW-BROOK GIRLS UP A TREE

SUPPER, that night, was a jolly affair. Miss Elting decided that, though the boys were full of pranks, they were lads well worth knowing. She, naturally, was very particular as to the associates of her charges, but she approved of the Tramp Club. The boys, even as their captain had averred at the first meeting, were "full of mischief." Despite their love of fun however they were straightforward, manly young men.

The party broke up about nine o'clock that evening.

"To-morrow the contest begins," reminded the captain.

"So it does," answered Harriet, as though she had overlooked that fact. "What time do you start?"

"Oh, I don't know. What time do you start?"

"After breakfast," laughed Harriet.

"Ha, ha! That's another joke," chuckled Dill.

"It isn't as yet. Perhaps it may be to-morrow night," replied Harriet. But just how

much of a joke it was to be, or on whom, Harriet Burrell at that moment did not know. She rather suspected it would be on the Tramp Club, but in this conjecture she was wrong.

"Oh, Harriet, why did you ever get us into this?" groaned Margery, after the departure of the boys. "Here am I half dead, with swollen feet and aching bones, and now I've got to enter a race of I don't know how many miles against a lot of athletic boys."

"As I said before, Margery, you may ride in the car if you prefer."

"No; I'm going through with this hike if it kills me."

"That's the way to talk!" nodded Harriet briskly. "Faint heart never won strong race."

"Have you any plans for fooling the boys, Harriet?" asked Jane.

Harriet shook her head, but, after a gesture of apology, drew Jane aside, whispering with her.

"Can you spare us a moment, Miss Elting?" asked Harriet. Soon the three were in earnest council.

"I agree," called Tommy ironically. "What ith it? I'm thtrong for it!"

"It's going to be hard work," declared the guardian, "and it'll be rough traveling during the last five miles, but we'll be there by noon.

We made no agreement with the boys to stop at any particular place?"

"No, Miss Elting," Harriet answered.

"Then everybody to bed!" ordered the guardian tersely.

At three the next morning four sleepy girls were tumbled out of bed by a barely less drowsy chaperon. But swift, silent work had to be done. Harriet put wood on the still glowing coals of the fire, then prepared coffee and a light meal.

"Thtop it!" screamed Tommy, when energetic Jane "struck" the tent, bringing it down on a pair of heads, the other of which was Margery's.

Jane McCarthy heedless of their protests husted relentlessly. The girls and their guardian ate as best they could, under the circumstances. By the time the light breakfast had been eaten all the packing had been done, and everything was ready for moving, except the dishes and supplies. These were packed by Margery, Hazel and Tommy. At four o'clock all was in readiness for the start.

"We are going to travel eastward over the mountains, girls," explained Harriet. "We shall have dense forests to go through and rugged paths to follow, but we shall save a number of miles and a great deal of time by

going that way. We ought to reach Meadow-Brook some hours ahead of the boys if they take the road, as I heard Mr. Baker say they would. We shall touch the road occasionally, especially after we get over the mountains. And you, Jane, must leave a sign on the fence. We will do the same. Wherever we touch the highway we will make a sign, also putting down the time. Those boys don't know anything about our secret signs, and they mustn't."

"Are we all ready?" asked the guardian.

"Yes."

"You had better start your car quietly, Jane," suggested Miss Elting.

Jane nodded. She understood. The camp of the Tramp Club was not so far away but that the boys could hear the motor plainly if they were awake, which the girls very much doubted, as the Tramps had confessed that they sat up late nights, telling stories, playing Indian war games and scouting in the woods.

"Shoulder packs!" commanded Harriet.

A few moments later the four girls with their guardian, after having put out the fire, started from the field. They were headed for the highway. Jane stood beside her car, waving to them until they were out of sight, then she calmly climbed into the vehicle and went to sleep. Crazy Jane had a plan of her own.

About five o'clock the camp of the Tramp Club began to show signs of life. The captain roused his companions. It had been his intention to get out earlier, but he had overslept, as had all of his men. Still, he did not consider that there was any necessity for great haste. Of course he had not the slightest idea that the Meadow-Brook Girls had broken camp at any such early hour.

The boys, while losing no time, made no effort at great haste. It was nearly six o'clock when they finished their breakfast and half an hour later, before they strapped on their packs and started down the road.

Dill Dodd chuckled triumphantly as he pointed to Jane McCarthy's automobile standing right where it had been since the previous afternoon.

"All sleepy heads over there," nodded Sam. "We could beat that outfit and sleep all the time."

"Wait a minute," answered George. "I don't see the tent, do you, fellows?"

No one spoke for a moment. Then the leader announced that he was going down to the girls' camp. He returned at a trot after having visited the deserted camp and peered into the automobile.

"Well, what is it?" questioned several boys.

"Fellows, we're stung. They've gone!" declared George.

"But—but the automobile is there?"

"Yes, and that Miss McCarthy is curled up like a kitten on the back seat sleeping as sweetly as you please. There's not another girl in camp."

"Well, what do you know about that?" drawled Davy.

"How long have they been gone, do you think?" asked Will.

"From the feel of the ashes I should say several hours." George did not know that they had smothered the fire with a damp blanket. "That was a fine trick to play on us the first day," growled George. "That's the girl of it."

"Hold on, Cap. You know Miss Burrell, who seems to be the spokesman for the outfit, said strategy wasn't barred. This isn't a trick, it's strategy. There's a difference between tricking and strategy you know."

"Boys, we've *got to* catch up with them," declared the captain. "Are we going to let a lot of girls get the best of us?"

"No!" shouted the boys in chorus.

"Then hike! Don't lose your wind at the start. Strike a steady clip, but after half an hour hit it up, and keep hitting it up till we

catch up with them and take the lead once more. This is a fine mess, but we'll soon be out of it with flying colors."

The Tramp Club walked for two hours without finding any trace of the Meadow-Brook Girls. The boys were becoming worried. By this time they surely ought to have found the tracks of the girls in the road.

"You don't think they have taken a short cut, do you?" asked Charlie.

Baker shook his head.

"They couldn't get over those mountains. No; they have been following the side of the road, so we wouldn't be able to pick up the trail. They're sharp ones. They know something about trailing. That's plain to be seen. Hark! what's that?"

The honk, honk of an automobile horn was heard in the far distance to the rear of them. They listened a moment, then pressed on. It was not an unusual happening to be passed by a motor car. They soon realized, however, that this one was coming at a much higher rate of speed than the statute said was lawful.

A cloud of dust arose a full half mile to the rear of them. As it bore down on the boys the dust rose higher and higher.

"Hoo-e-e-e! Hoo-e-e-e!" yelled a shrill voice from the heart of the dust cloud.

"It's that Miss McCarthy. They call her Crazy Jane," shouted Dill. "Let's hold her up."

Bent on mischief, the boys formed a chain across the road with clasped hands. On came the car careening from side to side, its horn honking hoarsely like the warning of a sentinel crow, its driver uttering her shrill "hoo-e-e-e," her hair standing out almost straight behind her in the breeze.

The boys stood firm; the car did not slacken its speed.

"Jump for your lives!" yelled the captain of the tramps. "She's going to run us down!"

A great black object flitted past them just as their ranks opened. There was not even time to get out of the road. The most they could do was to make an opening large enough —and barely large enough at that—to permit the passage of the car, which went roaring past them. A long-drawn "hoo-e-e-e," floated back to them, a choking cloud of dust and sand showered over them, sending the boys into severe coughing fits as they staggered off to the side of the highway and sat down on the dusty grass.

"Well, what do you think of that?" gasped Sam Crocker.

"I think it's exceedingly lucky for us that we got out of the road when we did," an-

swered Captain George, shaking an angry fist in the direction of the disappearing cloud of dust. "Why, she would have run right over us."

"She would," agreed the boys in chorus.

"But also she wouldn't. She knew we would get out of the way," added Sam Crocker.

"Come on, fellows. This won't do," cried George. "We've got to make tracks now." They scrambled to their feet and set out at a fast pace. In the meantime Jane McCarthy, chuckling over the scare she had given the Tramp Club, was racing along the highway in her mad drive to the eastward.

A few miles farther on she stopped the car and after taking a survey of the land, got out and made some chalk marks on a fence. Then she drove on more leisurely.

While all this was happening the Meadow-Brook Girls were traveling on, also at a fast pace. They had gotten over the rugged range of hills after having sustained some scratches on their hands and several rents in their frocks. They then came out into a corn field. A highway lay below them which they would have to cross. On the opposite side of the highway lay an apple orchard, the trees standing close together, their tops in most instances interlacing.

"I wonder if the boys have passed here?" questioned Hazel, shading her eyes and gazing up and down the road.

"No. They must still be a long way back," answered Harriet.

The Meadow-Brook Girls started down the hill, climbing the fence into the road. There before them, plainly discernible, were the tracks of an automobile.

"Jane went past here not long ago," decided Margery. "These are her car tracks, I am sure."

"Yes, and there's a chalk mark on the fence," said Miss Elting, pointing down the road a few rods. They hurried over to examine the sign.

"A broken arrow," exclaimed Harriet. "That means danger or 'look out.' Now, I wonder what we are to look out for? I don't see anything alarming."

"I think Jane means to inform us that the boys are not far from here and to look out for them," suggested the guardian.

"Yes, that must be it. Half-past twelve, the signal says, she passed here. That is nearly an hour ago. Come, girls, let's get over that fence in a hurry and be off. Once through the orchard, and they can't see us," urged Harriet Burrell.

"Wait; let's be certain that we are right,"

warned the guardian. She took a careful survey about them. Nothing of an alarming nature was to be seen. It was just an ordinary country scene, with the sun shining down overhead, the air warm and oppressive about them.

"Everything appears to be all right," she decided finally. "Yes, go ahead, girls." Miss Elting was the first to climb the roadside fence and drop down on the other side. She was quickly followed by the four girls of her party. "Keep on the alert, girls. If any of you catches sight of the boys drop down behind trees and don't speak." The guardian had entered into the spirit of the contest with an enthusiasm equal to that of the girls themselves. "I can't believe that they have gotten ahead of us. It isn't probable that that was what Jane meant when she marked the danger signal on the fence here."

"Wait," called Harriet. Springing back over the fence she wrote the letters "O. K." underneath the broken arrow and the triangle. This was for the purpose of informing Jane that her message had been read and understood in case she were to return that way later on, as she was more than likely to do.

This done they started briskly in among the trees of the orchard. They had not gone far before Tommy, who was in the lead, uttered a

shrill little scream of alarm. The girls had started to run toward her when they halted abruptly. Just ahead of them stood a great hulking bull with head lowered to the ground, his small eyes fixed menacingly on the girls. The bull uttered a deep, rumbling bellow.

"Thave me! Oh, thave me!" wailed Tommy.

"Run for your lives, girls," shouted the guardian.

They turned and were about to flee for the road when they came to another abrupt stop. To the right and the left of them were two other bulls, each with lowered head, pawing the dirt with first one front foot then the other.

All at once the girls understood the meaning of Jane's danger sign. She had seen the bulls in passing, and knowing that her companions would pass that way, had halted to leave a warning for them.

"Quick! Into the trees!" shouted Miss Elting. She grabbed the trembling Tommy and helped her up into a tree, Harriet in the meantime performing the same service for Margery and Hazel. Then the guardian and Harriet began scrambling up, but ere they had gotten off the ground the bulls charged them.

CHAPTER XIII

A SERIOUS PREDICAMENT

"CLIMB! Miss Elting, climb!" begged Harriet.

Margery and Tommy uttered shrill cries of terror.

The guardian reached for the crotch of the tree, just above her head, and drew herself up. Harriet leaped into the air, catching hold of an overhanging limb. She intended to pull herself free from the ground and out of the reach of the angry bulls.

The limb snapped. Apple tree boughs always are treacherous. Harriet landed on the ground in a heap. A gasp of horror escaped from the lips of the girls in the trees near at hand.

There followed a bellow and a rush from the third bull, which was some few yards distant from its fellows. The girls closed their eyes as the lowered head and wicked-looking horns seemed to come into contact with Harriet Burrell's body. Miss Elting, strong-nerved as she was, could not repress a scream. Margery, utterly terror-stricken, lost her balance, and had it not been for Hazel, who threw an arm about her, Margery would have fallen

from the tree and been at the mercy of the savage bulls.

In the meantime, having heard no scream from Harriet, the girls opened their eyes fearfully. They saw Harriet leaping for a higher limb of the tree. The head of the bull had crashed against the base of the tree where Harriet had been but a second before.

With remarkable presence of mind the girl, when she struck the ground, had rolled herself to one side, thus placing the tree between herself and her assailant. This gave her a few seconds respite. But in these few seconds Harriet gathered her faculties together. Springing to her feet she had flung herself straight up into the air, with arms thrown above her head to grasp the limb that her quick eyes had noted.

Most girls would have fainted, but Harriet Burrell did not. She was not of the fainting kind, as Captain Baker had so truly said a few hours before. A few awful seconds of suspense followed.

With feet curled under her, the girl's hands reached and clasped the limb. Then she drew herself up to it; a feat requiring both muscle and practice. Once there she lay along the creaking limb of the apple tree just out of reach of the tossing horns, gazing down into

the bloodshot eyes of the ferocious beast. The limb bent perilously. It threatened, at any second, to give way beneath her weight.

"Climb higher!" cried Miss Elting, "oh, climb higher!"

"I don't dare move. The limb may break if I do," answered Harriet in a wholly calm voice.

"Thave me, thave me!" wailed Tommy Thompson weakly.

"What shall we do? Please be careful, Harriet," begged the guardian in an agonized voice.

"I intend to be careful. I haven't any burning desire to fall on those sharp horns. I never saw such a fiendish expression in the eyes of an animal."

The limb creaked warningly. Harriet instantly ceased speaking. Somehow, she thought, the muscular effort of speaking must be putting a little added weight on the limb.

The bull walked away a few paces. He stopped and began bellowing and pawing.

"See if you can't call him away. I simply don't dare to move as long as he is so near," said Harriet.

"How shall I call him?" questioned the guardian.

"Flaunt something at him."

"I haven't anything to flaunt."

"Wait till I take off my thkirt," piped the little lisping girl.

"Be careful that you don't fall," warned Harriet.

Tommy quickly stripped off her skirt, then leaning over, swung it back and forth. Instantly there was a bellow and a charge from the enraged bull. The skirt was whisked from her hands on the sharp horns of the furious animal that had charged it.

"Thave me!" cried Tommy. "Oh, thave my thkirt!"

There was reason for alarm in Tommy's case at that moment. The bull was tossing its head to release the skirt that had become impaled upon the sharp horns. Presently the skirt fell to the ground. The animal began stamping upon and prodding it. Tommy got into action at about the same time. Shrieking and protesting, she began pelting the animal with apples that she picked from the tree for the purpose. Some of the missiles reached their mark. Most of them did not.

"Oh, my thkirt, my thkirt!" wailed the little girl.

"Never mind, you have saved Harriet," comforted Miss Elting.

Harriet, the instant the bull left her, started

to wriggle backwards. The limb gave way with a crash, and Harriet plunged to the ground, but by skilfully twisting her body she avoided striking on her head. She was up like a flash and once more sprang for the tree. This time she did not trust to a treacherous limb, but scrambled hastily up the trunk and perched herself high and safe in the crotch of the tree a few seconds later.

"Gracious! That was a narrow escape," gasped the guardian. "How do you feel?"

"I am all right." Harriet smiled faintly. Her cheeks were pale and her eyes large and bright. There were no other indications that she was disturbed at her succession of narrow escapes from the bull. "Poor Tommy, you lost your skirt, didn't you?"

"Ye—eth. Oh, what thhall I do?"

"I guess you will have to finish the day's hike in your petticoat," answered Miss Elting. "However, from present indications it will be dark by the time we get away from here. Besides your petticoat is black and will easily pass for an outside skirt."

"I can't, I can't," wailed the girl. "I won't go on thith way."

"Don't worry, Tommy. You may have my skirt. I don't mind going without it at all. I have a black underskirt, so the absence of my

outside skirt will hardly be noticed," answered Harriet.

"I won't. The naughty old bull. I want my own thkirt."

"You won't need it," said Margery, speaking for the first time since she had been overcome with terror.

"Don't you think they will go away?" questioned Hazel anxiously.

"Not so long as we are up here," replied Harriet. "I know their kind pretty well. I was chased by one at grandfather's farm two years ago. There is only one way to save yourself from them when they are angry—that is to keep out of their way. I think——"

"Oh, look! Look, girls!" cried Hazel in a tone of suppressed eagerness.

"Oh, thave me! There they come," moaned Tommy.

"It's the Tramp Club as I live," exclaimed Miss Elting. "Girls, we must call to them. It is a humiliating position for us, but we must get out of here. They can at least go for the farmer and ask him to drive the animals off."

"Oh, Miss Elting, please don't call to them," begged Harriet.

The boys were swinging down the road at a rapid but steady pace. They were walking in step, each with a heavy pack on his back, hat

brims tilted back, a manly looking lot of young men. As they reached a point opposite to the lower end of the orchard they began to sing, their voices raised in chorus:

"Forty-nine blue bottles are hanging on the wall,
Forty-nine blue bottles are hanging on the wall.
Take one of the bottles down and there'll be forty-eight blue bottles a hanging on the wall, a hanging on the wall.
Take one of the bottles down and there'll be forty-eight blue bottles a hanging on the wall, a hanging on the wall."

"Oh, help!" moaned Margery Brown.

"Thave me!" wailed Tommy.

Harriet and Miss Elting burst out laughing, but not loudly enough for their laughter to reach the Tramp Club, the members of which organization were trudging along past the orchard, wholly unconscious of the nearness of their friends.

CHAPTER XIV

HARRIET IS RESOURCEFUL

THE boys were still removing blue bottles from the wall as they swung on out of sight of the girls in the apple trees.

Harriet Burrell was shaking with laughter.

"That ith right. Laugh!" jeered Tommy.

"I gueth it ith funny, but I don't thee it. Maybe I'll laugh to-morrow."

"It is really the most laughable situation I ever heard of," admitted the guardian.

"One side of it, yes," agreed Harriet. "The other side isn't so funny. We must think of getting out of here. All our plans have come to nothing. The boys have passed us. I am afraid we shan't be able to catch up with them again unless we can get a start before long."

The bulls, attracted by the singing, had turned, now facing the road. They regarded the boys menacingly, but the Tramp Club did not see them. Now the animals once more turned toward the trees that held the girls. The beasts resumed their bellowing and pawing and moved up under the trees, tossing their heads, issuing challenge after challenge to the girls to come down. But the challenges were not accepted. Harriet regarded the beasts frowningly. The other girls gazed at them in terror.

"Now, Harriet Burrell, as you wouldn't allow me to call the boys, what do you propose to do? Remain up in a tree all night?" demanded the guardian.

"By no means."

"I don't dare thleep up here," complained Tommy. "What if I thhould fall out?"

"You wouldn't have far to fall," answered Margery.

"Oh, wouldn't it be awful," gasped Hazel, "if we were to fall out of these trees?"

"The animals will go to sleep themselves after dark, I am sure. We shall be able to get away then," replied Harriet wisely.

"I believe you are right. I hadn't thought of that," nodded Miss Elting. "But must we remain in this position all the rest of the day?"

"No, indeed," replied Harriet. "I had hoped that the owner of these animals might come along, but there seems to be no one about. You see, in the autumn, the farmers are seldom abroad in the fields unless they chance to be plowing, so I think we had better move."

"What have you in mind, Harriet? I know you have formed some plan to get us out of this predicament."

"Yes, I have. The plan may not work, but it is worth trying. I wish you would call the beasts to your tree. I can depend upon you. You will not lose your head. You will have to use your own skirt this time, but for goodness' sake, don't lose it. Some one must be presentable when we get to camp."

"See here, Harriet, I positively forbid your taking any further chances. You have had enough narrow escapes to-day as it is."

"There will be no particular danger for me, Miss Elting. You will be in more danger than I shall be when the plan really begins to work. Will you call the bulls over to your tree?"

"Yes. But I warn you I shan't be a party to any more foolishness."

Harriet made no reply. She scanned the orchard about her, finally fixing her eyes upon a tree with low-hanging limbs, situated several rods farther down the orchard and away from the road. The girl nodded, as though in answer to some question she had asked of herself.

"Now I am ready. I have removed my skirt," called the guardian. "What next?"

"Wait a moment." Harriet clambered down the tree a little way, placing herself in a position where she could jump without loss of time. "Now wave your skirt, please."

Miss Elting leaned down from her position in the tree and began swinging her skirt slowly back and forth. The result was immediate and startling. With bellows of rage, three savage bulls with lowered heads charged the blue skirt. It seems that these animals were not particular as to color. Blue was every bit as aggravating as red to them.

Harriet, the instant the beasts began charging, had dropped fearlessly to the ground. The bulls had not observed her.

"Harriet!" screamed Margery.

Harriet gave no heed to the cry of alarm. Instead she ran with all speed farther down the orchard, casting apprehensive glances over her shoulder now and then. A cry of warning from Miss Elting told her that the bulls had turned and were charging her. Harriet gave one quick glance over her shoulder, then leaped for a tree, up which she clambered with agility. She was none too soon, for, by the time she had cleared the trunk, the bulls met at the tree with horns clashing. For a moment they turned their attention to each other and then backed away and looked up at their intended victim.

"Miss Elting!" called the girl.

"Yes?"

"I am going to decoy the bulls as far away from you as possible. When you hear me scream you are all to climb down from the trees and run for the road fence. I'll try to hold the ugly beasts here while you are making the dash. But run for your life. Don't you dare to fall down."

"All of us?" questioned the guardian apprehensively.

"Yes, please."

"But, Harriet — suppose that we do get safely away—how are you going to leave the orchard?"

"I have thought of a way to do it," Harriet assured the guardian. "The danger, now, is in so many of us being here. When I scream the first time you are to run. When you get safely over the fence you are to give me the signal 'hoo-e-e-e-e.' I will know, by that, that you are safe. When I give you a second call, after you are in the highway, try to attract the attention of the bulls. That will be my chance to make a dash for the nearest fence."

"I don't like your plan," objected the guardian. "You are taking too great a risk."

"It is the only way we can get away from here before night," argued Harriet. "Even then, we should find it difficult to escape, for I think the beasts would camp right under these trees. They are determined to get us. I'm going to fool them. Now, call them!"

The guardian did so. The animals did not show any immediate inclination to move. So Miss Elting cautiously got down to the ground. That was all that was necessary. The beasts charged her. The guardian lost no time in scrambling into the tree. In the meantime Harriet had again dropped to the ground and was running at the top of her speed. She was still within easy reach of the voices of her companions, though out of their sight.

"Where are they?" she called.

"Right here," answered the guardian.

"All right. Don't try to keep them there. I am not afraid."

"We have no desire to, I assure you, Harriet. But do be careful."

Harriet was still on the ground. She moved a little farther down through the orchard, getting out where the trees were less thick, so as to be still within sight of the beasts she was hoping to lure away from the trees that held her companions. The bulls did not appear to see her, so Harriet stripped off her own skirt and began waving it at them. It was several moments later when the bulls discovered her and then they started for her without loss of time.

"Run!" screamed Harriet. "Run! Don't make a sound to attract their attention." She adopted her own advice and started down through an aisle of apple trees, her feet scarcely seeming to touch the ground. The girl was flaunting her skirt over her head. She heard bellows of rage off toward the trees in which her companions were perched. The girl halted. A few seconds later she saw the beasts coming. Instead of immediately taking to a tree Harriet began running again, still waving the skirt high above her head.

Harriet heard Tommy give a little scream.

It was quickly suppressed. Undoubtedly Miss Elting had sharply rebuked the terrified little girl. Harriet did not pause again. This was her last chance to get the bulls away from the trees that held her companions. Their safety depended upon her doing so. She was determined to succeed, even at the imminent risk of losing her own safety. The animals did not seem to be gaining on her, but all at once they put on a great burst of speed. Harriet darted sideways, then straight ahead again. This time she leaped out into the open, flaunting the skirt, tantalizing the ugly beasts, resorting to every artifice she could think of to take their attention from Miss Elting and the other girls.

Harriet succeeded beyond her expectations. She also succeeded in enraging the beasts far more than she had hoped to do.

Now they were getting too close for safety, so Harriet darted in among the trees, followed by the three savage, bellowing bulls. She grasped the first low-hanging limb that she came to, and swung herself up into a tree. A pair of sharp horns caught the end of the skirt, rending it nearly to the waist. Harriet clung desperately to the skirt. She did not propose to lose it if she could help doing so. Jerking the skirt away she climbed higher and, bracing herself, gazed down triumphantly.

"That's the time I fooled you, didn't I?" she taunted. Leaning forward the girl waved the skirt. She reached down far enough to flaunt the skirt full in the face of the nearest animal. He bellowed his rage and pawed the dirt. She continued to aggravate him. If she could only keep them all there until her companions reached the highway!

"Hoo-e-e-e-e!" sounded the distant, long-drawn call of the Meadow-Brook Girls.

"Oh, they're safe!" cried Harriet joyfully. For a moment she closed her eyes and clung panting to the trunk of the tree. After resting a few moments she cautiously drew on her skirt and fastened it, three pairs of red, evil eyes observing her threateningly. Then she climbed to the topmost branches of the apple tree, hoping to get high enough to obtain a glimpse of her companions.

"I might have known that a tree with such low boughs would not be high enough for that," she muttered. "But I'll call."

Listening she heard the "Hoo-e-e-e!" of Miss Elting again.

"Hoo-e-e-e-e-e-e! Hoo-e-e-e-e!" answered Harriet Burrell.

In response the others began shouting. The bulls did not appear to be interested. One of them lay down.

"My goodness! I do hope they aren't going to stay here the rest of the day," cried Harriet. "I don't know what I shall do in that event."

She now tried Tommy's plan and began pelting the animal that had lain down with apples. It took very little of this sort of treatment to bring the beast to his feet. He leaped up with a bellow and began pawing up the dirt, sending showers of it over his companions.

Harriet chuckled.

"Now, if only Miss Elting will attract their attention. I think I had better try to hide myself and keep quiet." This she did. She could hear the shouts and yells of her companions. They were setting up a great racket off there in the road, doing their utmost to draw the attention of the animals away from Harriet.

After fully five minutes of this one of the bulls walked off with his head in the air. He stood a moment with head still erect, gazing off toward the highway. Suddenly he started on a run. The other two bulls followed him with their gaze for a few moments, then they, too, started away at a moderate trot.

"The plan has worked! It has worked!" cried Harriet in triumph, under her breath. "Oh, I do hope they get far enough away. I must crawl down so as to be ready for my big

spring. This is almost equal to a Spanish bull fight, except that I haven't any barbs to stick into them."

The girl crept cautiously to the ground. She stood at the foot of the tree, shielding her body by its trunk, peering around the tree at the running bulls. They were headed straight toward the road fence, traveling more rapidly now.

In order to reach the fence at the side of the field, Harriet would be obliged to go out into the open, where, if the animals turned, she would be sure to be discovered.

A cry from her companions told her that the time for action on her part had arrived. Without an instant's hesitation Harriet Burrell started for a fence which stood to the eastward of her place of refuge. A few moments later she had cleared the orchard and reached the open field. She saw the three bulls pawing the ground by the roadside fence in the distance. Her companions were standing in the middle of the road waving their skirts at the animals, not daring to get close to the fence.

"Run! Run, Harriet!" screamed Miss Elting.

As though they had understood the meaning of the guardian's warning, the bulls wheeled sharply. They saw the fleeing figure of the

Meadow-Brook Girl and, leaving Miss Elting and her party, charged straight across the field towards Harriet, while the latter was still some distance from the fence towards which she was running.

"Run! Oh, run!" came the voice of Miss Elting in a terrified wail. "Run!"

Suddenly, Harriet, who had turned to glance over her shoulder to measure the distance between herself and her pursuers, stumbled and plunged headfirst into a little depression in the ground.

A scream rose from her horrified companions.

CHAPTER XV

A RACE FOR LIFE

"SHE'LL be killed!" wailed Hazel, covering her eyes to shut out the sight.

"Thave her!" screamed Tommy. The little girl sprang forward, scrambled over the fence and, had she, too, not fallen would have dashed down the field to Harriet Burrell's assistance, utterly regardless of her own peril. The guardian climbed over the fence and had placed a firm grip on the little girl before the latter could get to her feet. Miss

Elting fairly dragged Tommy back to the fence and assisted her over.

"She's up again!" cried Hazel. "Oh, hurry, hurry!" Her voice rose to a piercing wail.

Harriet had gotten to her feet. She cast one frightened look over her shoulder, then continued to run towards the fence. They saw that she limped a little. Nor was the girl running as fast as before her fall. The three bulls had gained considerably during the few seconds that Harriet had been down. They were now charging with lowered heads, bunched closely together, this time as though determined that their victim should not escape them.

Just ahead of her, Harriet had seen a ditch, deep and broad, made for the purpose of draining the land. Instantly a plan formed in her active mind. She could not hope to win the race for life by running straight ahead now that the beasts had gained so much on her.

"She's tiring! They'll get her!" moaned Hazel.

"Why didn't you let me go?" screamed Tommy, beside herself with anxiety.

The guardian did not answer. Her eyes, wide and staring, were following every movement of the fleeing girl and the pursuing bulls.

Harriet stopped short, bending over in a crouching position.

"She's going to try to trick them! Oh, what courage!" breathed Miss Elting.

"Look! Thee her now!" shouted Tommy, with a note of triumph in her strained voice.

The animals were fairly upon Harriet. When it seemed as though their horns were touching her, the girl leaped obliquely into the ditch. They saw her run, splashing along in it for a few rods, then spring to the bank on the same side from which she had jumped in.

The watchers saw something else too. The bulls, so intent upon reaching their victim, had taken no notice of the ditch. Perhaps they had been charging with closed eyes, as many bulls do. At any rate the leading beast flung himself headlong into the ditch. The others braced themselves with their front feet and went sliding into the ditch on top of their leader, digging furrows with their hoofs in the soft dirt.

Harriet Burrell's ruse had been successful. She spoke no word, but a glint of triumph flashed into her eyes as she cast a quick glance at the floundering animals, then ran straight toward her companions. This time there was no limping, no lessening of speed. She had covered less than half the distance before two of the animals that had slid into the ditch had recovered themselves and began looking about for the prey that had eluded them.

The slender figure of the Meadow-Brook girl, they soon discovered, was racing across the field. The two bulls clambered out of the ditch and charged again. Now that they were in the open field it was a race that would go to the fleetest. No tricks would avail Harriet this time. She knew that her safety depended on outrunning her pursuers. Had Harriet not been an athletic girl she would have succumbed long before. As it was she ran at a wonderful rate of speed. The shouts of her companions, though heard but faintly, encouraged her, for Harriet's mind was on her work.

The ruse practiced by Harriet had given her the lead in the race. Miss Elting, however, saw that the bulls were gaining on the plucky girl.

"Girls," she said sharply, "remain where you are." With that she climbed to the top of the fence and leaped over into the field. It was her idea that even though Harriet did succeed in reaching the fence, the girl might not have sufficient vitality left to enable her to climb over it.

Harriet, as she drew near, discovered the guardian on her side of the fence and divined the latter's purpose. The girl motioned for Miss Elting to get back. The guardian shook her head and remained where she was.

"Go back! Go back! I'm all right," cried Harriet breathlessly.

The bulls were gaining rapidly. They were now but a few rods behind Harriet Burrell. She put on more speed after one last look over her shoulder while Tommy and Hazel were shouting their encouragement.

"You will be caught. Quick!" gasped Harriet, as she drew rapidly near to the guardian. "Oh, please hurry back to the road!"

Miss Elting did not move. Harriet dashed up beside her and stopped short. Miss Elting grasped the girl's arm. Harriet pulled herself free.

"Not an inch till you get over," declared the girl.

The guardian glanced at her questioningly, then vaulted the fence. Harriet followed her. But ere Harriet had touched the ground on the other side, two sharp-horned heads crashed into the fence. Harriet sank down at the side of the road breathless and exhausted.

Miss Elting pulled the girl to her feet.

"Throw your shoulders well back and inhale deeply!" she commanded. She then led Harriet slowly up and down the road for a few moments. Harriet's heavy respirations soon moderated, and ten minutes later her breathing was almost normal.

"I think we had better wait here. Jane will be along looking for us if we do not get to our camping place by night. Do you feel exhausted?" asked Miss Elting.

"A little weak in the knees, that's all," answered Harriet. "I shall be ready to move in a few minutes. I don't want to stay here. We must try to catch up with the boys."

"No. I shall not allow it. You have done quite enough for one day—quite enough to tire out the strongest man. Do you really think you can stand it to walk slowly?"

"Of course I can," answered Harriet brightly. "See, I still have some sprint left in me." Harriet ran up and down the road, vaulting the fence on the opposite side of it.

"You have indeed," laughed Miss Elting. It was the first laugh that had been heard in some time. "You are the most remarkable girl I've ever known, or ever shall know. Now we had better decide on which way we shall go. I think the shorter way will be to skirt the orchard and continue on across the fields. We shan't try the orchard again."

All the girls agreed with the guardian. They had had quite enough of that particular orchard. Following the road for a short distance they came to the adjoining field, which they entered and continued on their journey. The afternoon

was now well advanced. Miss Elting had left a mark on the fence to inform Jane of their route, in case she should come back to look for them. This with the time of their passing would give Jane an idea when to expect them at the place stretched for the camp.

As they proceeded, Harriet's strength returned to her. By the time they had walked two miles from the scene of their recent exciting experiences she had fully recovered from her recent exhaustion. Tommy, now that she had time to think about herself, was bewailing the loss of her skirt. She firmly declared she would not go to camp with only an underskirt on and announced her intention of sleeping out in the fields.

Six o'clock had arrived by the time they came out on the crest of a hill overlooking the valley in which they hoped to find Jane McCarthy and their camp. They scanned the valley eagerly.

"There's our tent," cried Hazel, pointing to a clump of trees to the left of them. No person was in sight, however. This they thought strange.

"I should not be surprised if everybody had gone in search of us," said Miss Elting.

"I hope they don't find uth," spoke up Tommy.

"It will be a good opportunity for you to get

into camp without being seen," suggested Harriet. "Come, let's hurry down before some one does come."

In order that their approach might be the more screened, they hurried over to a fence along which bushes and small trees grew. Sheltered by these they made their way down into the valley. But when they reached the road Tommy halted.

"Not another thtep," she declared stubbornly. No amount of urging would induce her to go on. It was decided to leave her there while the rest continued on, Harriet promising to return to the little girl with another skirt as soon as possible. So Tommy hid in the bushes, peering out at the retreating forms of her companions.

A fire was smouldering in the Meadow-Brook camp. As the party of girls approached, four boys sprang up. They had been sitting about the fire. Their hats were off instantly, and they tried gallantly to force down the grins that persisted in appearing on their faces.

"Why, how do you do?" greeted Captain Baker of the Tramp Club.

"Where is Miss McCarthy?" questioned Miss Elting, pretending not to have observed the grins.

"She and a couple of the fellows went back

to look for you," spoke up Dill Dodd. "The pace was rather swift for you, even if you did get an early start, wasn't it?" he chuckled.

"Yes, the pace was much swifter than you imagine," answered the guardian frigidly.

"It is too bad that Miss McCarthy started out. She may spend a good part of the evening searching for you, not knowing that you have reached camp," said the captain.

"She will know," replied Harriet. "Jane will be back here soon."

"How will she know?" frowned Davy.

"Oh, they have a wireless telegraph system, you know," chuckled Sam.

"Yes, that is it! How did you guess it?" smiled Harriet.

"Don't forget Tommy," reminded Miss Elting.

Harriet flushed. She had indeed, forgotten all about the little lisping girl who was hiding in the bushes. Harriet hurried into the tent.

"That's right. You are one girl short," exclaimed George, suddenly discovering the absence of Miss Thompson. "Did she fall by the wayside? Was the pace too swift for her?"

"Young man, you talk too much," objected Margery indignantly.

"I know it," laughed George. "I can't help it."

Miss Elting's face relaxed in a smile.

"Where *is* Miss Thompson?" questioned Dill.

"Miss Thompson will be here soon," replied the guardian.

Unnoticed by the boys Harriet slipped away, a bundle under her arm. She returned, a quarter of an hour later, accompanied by Tommy clad in her outside skirt and at peace with the world. They had barely reached the camp before the sound of a motor horn was heard. A few moments afterward Crazy Jane came tearing along the road and swung up to the camp.

"Here we are darlin's," she cried. "I got your message."

"Message?" questioned the captain. "Who gave her a message, Fred?"

"Blest if I know," answered Fred Avery, getting down from the car, removing his hat and scratching his head thoughtfully. "Wireless, I think."

"What did I tell you?" nodded Sam.

The captain regarded Fred inquiringly.

"Oh, don't ask me," said the latter. "Miss McCarthy got out of her car about five miles back, walked to the fence then back to the car. She said her friends had passed there about four o'clock in the afternoon and were in camp then."

"Well, what do you know about that?" wondered the captain. "Tell us how you did it?"

"A little bird told me," chuckled Jane.

The girls burst into a merry peal of laughter.

CHAPTER XVI

A TREAT THAT WAS NOT A TREAT

"NEVER mind. We won't be as mean as you are," declared Sam, springing up. "We will return good for evil."

"Did you see the three bulls?" interrupted Jane. "I knew you would cross that orchard and I was afraid you'd meet them."

"We did," answered Miss Elting.

"What's that?" The captain was interested instantly. "You say you met the bulls?"

"Yes. I might as well tell you," explained Miss Elting. "You think we weren't able to keep the pace we set for ourselves. I don't want my girls to rest under that imputation, for I believe that they can completely outdistance you boys. We did meet the three bulls. Yes, they treed us. We were all up in apple trees when you boys passed singing 'Forty-Nine Blue Bottles.'"

Some one laughed. The captain frowned at the boy who had done so.

"You let us pass, and never called us to come to your assistance?" he demanded.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"We preferred to get out of our scrape without appealing to our rivals, Captain Baker."

"Whew! That was a fix. How'd you manage it?"

"Through the resourcefulness and courage of Harriet Burrell. Had it not been for her we undoubtedly should still be up in the trees in the apple orchard."

"Please tell us about it."

"Please don't," begged Harriet blushingly.

"Now that you have aroused our curiosity, it would be cruel not to tell us the whole story," declared George.

"Yeth. Cruelty to animalth," nodded Tommy.

Miss Elting, despite Harriet's protestations, did tell the boys the story, giving the full credit for their rescue to Harriet Burrell, to whom it belonged. The boys listened in open-mouthed wonder.

"Fellows, we aren't so much as we think we are," declared the chief of the Tramp Club. "I propose three cheers for Miss Burrell. Now! Altogether! One, two, three!"

They gave three rousing cheers in which Tommy's shrill voice joined.

"Who's all right?" demanded the captain at the end of the cheer.

"Miss Burrell's all right!" yelled the Tramps. "For she's a jolly good fel—low; For she's a jolly good fellow," sang the Tramps, as with hands on each other's shoulders they marched through the camp, and out into the field on their way to their own camp, a short distance from that of the Meadow-Brook Girls.

Miss Elting was laughing merrily. Harriet's face was crimson.

"I call that downright mean. They were making fun of me."

"Why, Harriet! You know they were not," rebuked Miss Elting. "It was the highest compliment those lads could pay."

"It hath been a day of experientheth, hathn't it?" Tommy questioned.

Harriet's face was still flushed as she began to prepare the supper. Each member of the party now remembered that she had an appetite. While they were getting the meal Jane told them how the boys had gloated over having "walked the girls off their feet," as the tramps expressed it. Jane announced triumphantly that she had been more than a match for them, which her companions could well believe, for Jane had a sharp tongue, besides being the possessor of a fund of Irish wit.

The smoke curling up from the other camp told the girls that the boys were busy getting their own supper. While eating, the guardian was obliged to go over the story of their experiences for the benefit of Jane, who interrupted now and then with humorous questions.

"Are the boys coming over this evening?" asked Margery, after they had finished supper and she and Tommy were washing the dishes.

"They did not say," called Hazel. "It is safe to believe they will. I wonder if we can't get rid of those boys? They make me nervous. It seems to me that they are perpetually on the scene whether one wants to see them or not."

"Don't be hard on the poor Tramp Club, Hazel," laughed Harriet. "Remember you might still be stuck fast in the swamp had they not come to the rescue."

"That's so," responded Hazel, with a sigh. "I never thought of that. They're really not so bad after all."

"I have met worse," averred Harriet solemnly. Whereupon there was a general laugh.

The tramps had gathered the fuel for the Meadow-Brook Girls, stacking it up in piles of various lengths. The lads really were trying to make themselves useful to the young women. As yet there had been no outward evidence of

Captain Baker's assertion that some of them were "full of mischief." The girls had piled the campfire high with wood and gathered about it when strains of music were heard.

"Oh, it ith a band, it ith a band," cried Tommy.

"Coming to serenade us, probably," announced Margery.

"No. I think it is some one playing on harmonicas," answered Miss Elting after a moment of listening.

"It's those boys," groaned Hazel. "What mischief are they up to now?"

"I told you. They are coming over to serenade us. I think the serenade must be for Harriet."

"They are carrying something on their shoulders too," cried Harriet.

The girls, by this time, had run out to the edge of the camp and in the faint twilight were trying to make out what it was that the Tramp Club were carrying. As the boys drew nearer, the girls saw that it was a burlap sack. Four boys were bearing the sack on their shoulders. It appeared to be very heavy.

"Why, boys," exclaimed Miss Elting. "Are you moving?"

"Yes, Miss Elting," answered Captain Baker, doffing his hat. "We are moving, in a sense.

We have come prepared to lay the spoils of our forage at the feet of beauty. Boys, dump the bag. You know where."

One of the boys untied the string by which the mouth of the sack had been secured, then the two lads at that end stepped from under. Instantly the contents began rolling out at Harriet Burrell's feet.

"Muskmelons!" gasped the girls.

Great golden and green muskmelons bumped to the ground. Harriet's face was full of color.

"They—they aren't all for me? Surely, you don't think I am equal to eating all of those?" she gasped.

"They are laid at your feet," answered George dramatically. "For you and your friends."

"This is splendid," declared the guardian, her face aglow with pleasure. "But we do not deserve so much. You have robbed yourselves. Where did you get them?"

"Of a farmer," replied George promptly.

"You must take most of them for yourselves, boys," urged Miss Elting. "We simply could not eat half of all that lot."

"No. They are all for you. We have plenty. Besides, you'll find some of them aren't good, but out of the lot you may be able to get enough for breakfast."

"We can eat all night if nethethary," announced Tommy. "Maybe we can eat them all before we go on to-morrow."

"One melon apiece will be quite enough for us, my dears," reproved Miss Elting. "Won't you join us in our feast, boys?"

The young men shook their heads.

"They're yours," replied the captain, his eyes on Harriet as he said it. "I brought you some salt, too," he added, drawing a piece of newspaper from his pocket. "Perhaps you like salt on your melons."

"You are very thoughtful," smiled Miss Elting. "I think we have salt. How about it, Jane?"

"We have a whole bag of it."

"We will take yours, thank you," smiled Harriet. "It is much finer salt than ours."

"Yes, it's the salt the farmer over yonder uses to give to his sheep," interjected Sam. "We borrowed some from him."

Miss Elting laughed a little at this blunt speech.

"You are very funny, boys!" she said. "But we are grateful to you. I don't know how we shall be able to repay you."

"We have shared your hospitality — your bounteous hospitality," answered the captain. "We wished to make some slight return."

"What shall we do with what melons are left over?" asked Miss Elting.

"Carry them on with you. You have a car in which to transport your stuff."

"I suppose we had better do that," mused the guardian. "When we reach the next camping place we shall insist on entertaining you at our camp. We greatly appreciate this treat."

"Thank you," said George Baker, looking somewhat embarrassed.

Shortly afterwards Captain Baker rose from where he had been sitting and with an uneasy look on his face announced that they must go. With his fellows he hurriedly left the camp, not even taking the melon sack along. They were seen no more that night.

The girls noted Baker's embarrassed manner and thought it strange that the boys should have left so abruptly. They were at a loss to understand it.

"I am glad they have left the melons, anyway," declared Harriet.

"Yes, wasn't that lovely of the boys to bring the fruit to us?" nodded Miss Elting. "They are really nice boys. I am rather glad that we met them."

"You may change your mind before we have finished with them," replied Harriet, with an enigmatical smile.

"They—they aren't all for me?" she gasped.

"What do you mean, dear?"

"I can't really explain. But I feel rather than know that those young men are ready to play tricks. They'd better not try any of them or we shall make them regret that they ever played tricks on the Meadow-Brook Girls."

"Aren't thethe melonth delithiouth?" breathed Tommy. She was now eating her second melon. The other girls were enjoying theirs equally well.

"Yes," agreed Miss Elting. "The finest I ever ate. They must have cost the boys quite a sum of money, even though melons are cheap in the country. I——"

"Thomebody ith coming," warned Tommy.

"The boys are returning, I presume," smiled Miss Elting. But instead of the boys they were surprised to see a strange man striding into camp. He was plainly a farmer. He wore his whiskers long and his trousers were tucked in the tops of his boots. His face did not bear a pleasant expression.

"So I've caught you at it, eh?" he said sarcastically.

"What do you mean?" demanded the guardian rising hastily.

"You know well enough what I mean. In the first place, you are trespassing on my premises."

"We have permission to camp here," interjected Jane.

"Who gave it?"

"The farmer who owns this land."

"I happen to own this land, and I haven't given any tramps permission to camp on it."

"Then some one must have played a trick on me," declared Crazy Jane. "Wait till I get sight of that man again."

"We are very sorry, sir, but we are wholly innocent of trespassing. We are not tramps, either. Of course we are willing to pay you for the privilege of camping here to-night. What do you consider a fair price?"

"Wal, I reckon about seventy-five cents will be all right for the camping."

Miss Elting handed the money over to him.

"I am sorry to have put you to all this trouble, but we supposed we had permission to stay here over night."

"Thay," questioned Tommy. "You are a rich man, aren't you?"

"No. Why?"

"Well, you thhould be."

"By the way, ladies, there is another little matter that you'll have to fix up before we go any further."

The guardian and the girls glanced inquiringly at their mercenary visitor.

"What do you mean?"

"Them melons," answered the farmer, indicating the fruit with a nod.

"I don't understand you, sir." The guardian was plainly perplexed. Harriet was smiling broadly. She thought she understood now.

"The melons you stole from my field."

"Stole from your field?" gasped Miss Elting.

"Yes."

"Sir, you insult us! We have stolen neither melons nor anything else. I demand that you leave this camp instantly. We shall not endure such accusations."

"You didn't steal them, eh?"

"No, we didn't," answered Jane, who had stepped forward.

"Then where did you get them?"

The girls looked at one another. No one spoke. None wished to place the blame on the Tramp Club. The girls now began to understand the hurried departure of Captain Baker and his friends. Miss Elting saw that there was only one course to pursue under the circumstances.

"I can't tell you where we got the melons, sir, but we didn't steal them. How much are the melons worth?"

"Why?" queried the farmer, scenting a bargain.

"We intend to pay for them," answered Harriet coldly.

"How many melons were there?" asked the farmer, more blandly.

"Two dozen," Harriet replied.

"That'll be about four-eighty," nodded the farmer.

"But that's——"

"It's cheaper than the risk of going to jail," broke in the farmer meaningly.

CHAPTER XVII

TRYING OUT THE GIPSY TRAIL

THE farmer pocketed the money that Miss Elting handed him.

"I've my own opinion of you!" flared Crazy Jane.

"Maybe you have," chuckled the farmer, "but——"

"You're quite right," Jane McCarthy taunted. "You wouldn't feel highly complimented if I were to express that opinion!"

"If it's that kind of an opinion——" muttered the farmer, turning red under the coat of tan on his face.

"It's *worse!*" retorted Crazy Jane incisively.

Muttering under his breath, but failing to

speak clearly, the abashed farmer turned on his heel, striding away.

The humor of the situation now appealing to them, the girls and their guardian began to laugh heartily.

"Harriet, I believe you suspected this all the time," declared Miss Elting finally.

"Those boys looked mischievous. I didn't know what it was all about, but after a while, I confess, I did suspect them. Never mind, I'll be even with them."

"No, you leave it to me," interjected Jane.

"I am glad that none of you girls betrayed the boys," declared Miss Elting approvingly. "I would suggest that you say nothing to them when we next see them. Let them introduce the subject if it is introduced at all. They may betray themselves. Tommy, don't you lisp a word of it."

"I don't lithp," retorted the little girl indignantly. "I thpeak jutht like other folkth."

"I did not mean it that way, dear," laughed the guardian. "I meant that you shouldn't mention our experience to any one. Now that we have bought and paid for the melons I think we had better stow them in the car. Come, let us get ready for bed."

"Are we to make an early start in the morning?" asked Hazel.

"Yes. We must not delay if we expect to remain in the contest."

The girls had no intention of giving up the contest. They thought it possible that they might have the company of the Tramp Club on the morrow, as a good part of the Meadow-Brook course lay over a highway, this being the most direct route for the day's tramping.

Rather to their surprise they discovered no trace of the Tramp Club next day. The smoke from the latter's campfire was no longer visible when the girls left their own camp in the morning, nor was there any indication on the road that the boys had passed over it. What the girls did not know was that the boys had slipped off into a ravine when the word had been brought to them that the irate farmer was out looking for the people who had visited his melon patch. From there they had moved inland and made a new camp. In the morning they took a roundabout course, avoiding the highway. It were better to be beaten by the girls that day than to be caught by the angry farmer. It was because of this longer route that the Meadow-Brook Girls were again able to get ahead of their rivals.

The tracks of Jane's car had long since been obliterated when the party neared the end of the day's journey. This did not trouble them,

for a certain definite stopping place had been agreed upon, and as was customary, when following the highway, the girls now and then dropped a handful of grass in the road. Especially was this done when they came to forks in the road, so that in case Jane McCarthy returned that way to look for them she might see which direction they had taken. In doing this, though the girls were unaware of the fact, they were following a gipsy practice as old as gipsies themselves. It was the gipsies' way of marking their trail for the benefit of others of their kind who had straggled behind.

"I think this is the place," decided Miss Elting, halting, pointing down a narrow lane that extended through a field of stunted bushes and brush. The gate that had once shut off this byway from the main road lay broken at one side of it and a ridge of grass had grown knee high in the middle of the lane. It was a lane that had once led down to a cider mill that now lay a heap of ruins.

"It ith thpooky-looking," observed Tommy.

"Jane is here," exclaimed Harriet. "I see her car tracks, but I don't see her car."

"No; the car has come out onto the highway and gone on," Miss Elting declared. "Jane must have driven to the next town to get something. We will go down that lane."

Harriet dropped some grass in the road, marking a trail into the byway to notify Jane that they had arrived. They then made their way down the lane. The girls were tired and footsore. Walking in the road had been more wearisome than tramping over the hills and fields, perhaps because the former was less interesting and more monotonous. It was therefore a welcome sight when they espied the tent that they called home, even though it was a now weather-beaten and dingy-looking piece of canvas. But Jane was nowhere in sight. Neither was her car.

"Where can Jane be?" exclaimed Margery.

"Perhaps this will explain matters," replied Miss Elting, taking down a sheet of writing paper that had been pinned to the flap of the tent. "Ah! Jane says she has gone on to the town of Granite to meet her father, from whom she got a letter this morning. She says she may not be back until late, and that we shall find the melons in the bushes to the west of the tent."

"I don't want any of those old melons," pouted Margery.

"I do," retorted Tommy. "I'll eat all I can get."

"At least, we have a right to eat them now that we have paid for them," smiled the guard-

ian. "The first thing to do will be to heat some water and bathe. We are all very dusty. Tommy, you and Margery take your baths first. In the meantime we will build the fire and get the supper going. This is going to be a pleasant camp. I wonder if we shall see our friends, the boys, this evening?"

"Not if they see us first," chuckled Harriet. "Oh, what we won't do to them when we get the opportunity."

"Jane must have had quite a time putting up the tent without assistance," remarked Miss Elting. "She did it very well, too."

Harriet was making the fire with Hazel's assistance, Tommy and Margery were preparing for their baths. Twilight was upon them before they realized it. By that time the supper was cooking, the coffee steaming, the savory odor of food filling the air about them. The melons were reserved for the dessert. These had ripened and were now soft, sweet and delicious.

"Girls, it is worth four dollars and eighty cents to have such melons, isn't it?" smiled the guardian.

"Yes, indeed," chorused the girls.

"I wonder what has become of the Tramp Club," mused Harriet.

"You will not see any more of the Tramps

for a while," laughed Hazel. "It is a wonder to me that we haven't seen any real tramps since we have been out on this trip. At potato-digging time one usually sees a great many of them."

"We haven't been on the road much, or perhaps we should have seen more of them. That is one advantage in keeping away from the highways. One meets few live things in the fields except the birds and occasionally sheep and cattle."

"Not to mention bulls," finished Harriet laughingly. "Speaking of tramps, I believe I just saw one over yonder," added the girl.

"Are you joking?" questioned the guardian.

For answer Harriet sprang up and ran toward the tent. She did not reach it. She halted sharply as a man stepped in front of her. He was a typical follower of the road, dirty, unkempt and evil looking.

"What do you want here?" demanded Harriet, with a calmness that she was far from feeling.

"Not much. We want some money and something to eat," leered the intruder.

"You will get neither here. What were you doing in that tent? You came here to rob us. Go away before we give you something you won't like."

Miss Elting and Hazel sprang up, scattering the tin dishes far and wide as they ran to Harriet's assistance, when three other men stepped into view from the far side of the tent.

"If you folks will hand out your valuables, and make no racket about it, we won't hurt you," announced one of the newcomers. "What we want is a little help, that's all. We're poor fellows in distress. We ain't the kind that rob women. We ask for assistance."

Miss Elting's revolver was in the tent where she could not reach it now. Had she had it with her she would have assisted the men in a way that they would not have liked. What to do under the circumstances she did not know. Neither Tommy nor Margery appeared able to do anything. They were frightened nearly out of their wits.

"You have a peculiar way of asking for assistance. Had you come to us in the proper manner we should have been glad to give you something to eat. Now we shall not. Neither have we money for you. I order you to go away from here. If you refuse the consequences will be on your own heads. We are not quite so defenseless as you might think. Will you go?"

The spokesman laughed. The spirit of the girls appeared to amuse him. The fellow had

not the least idea that there was any other person about. He, with his companions, had seen the Meadow-Brook Girls come into the camp alone. Not another person so far as they knew, was within some miles of the place. They had watched the camp and waited until dark to carry out their plan of robbing the five women.

"Can you get it, do you think, Harriet?" questioned Miss Elting in a low tone.

"I'll try," she answered. She knew what the guardian meant. "It" meant Miss Elting's revolver. All at once the girl darted past the man who stood directly in front of her. She had almost reached the tent, when one of the tramps caught hold of her by the shoulder. Harriet was lithe and quick. She slipped from his detaining clutch and sprang back. But her opportunity was gone. The men partly divining her purpose, had quickly blocked the entrance to the tent. The leader nodded to one of them to watch Tommy and Margery. Three others directed their attention to Miss Elting, Harriet and Hazel. They placed themselves in such positions that the girls were hedged in. To try to run would be to fall into the clutches of one or another of the three ruffians who were guarding them.

One of the men uttered a shrill whistle. Still another tramp came running into the camp.

"Turn out the tent in a hurry. Don't take anything that ain't good. There's money in there somewhere. Now turn your pockets out, ladies."

His words were cut short by a long wailing cry uttered by Harriet Burrell.

"Hoo-e-e-e-e! Hoo-e-e-e-e-e! Help, help!" It was the call of the Meadow-Brook Girls, with the warning cry for assistance added.

The man who had made the demand sprang at her. Harriet leaped back. In doing so she felt her arms pinioned by a second man. She had forgotten for the moment that there were guards behind her. Miss Elting suddenly found her arms gripped from behind. She struggled with all her strength. So did Harriet. Hazel screamed as she felt her own arms pinioned.

"Herd the other two in the tent, then git all the swag you can find," commanded the spokesman breathlessly, for he was having his hands full helping his assistant to hold Miss Elting and the two girls. One grasped Tommy and Margery by their arms, and fairly dragging them over, flung them into the tent. "Get the stuff! Never mind those two. They're too scared to bother. It's these that we've got to look out for," he directed.

"Hoo-e-e-e-e-e! Hoo-e-e-e-e-e! Help, help!" screamed Harriet.

"Yell, Hazel!" gasped Harriet.

"I—I can't! Oh, I can't!" wailed Hazel.

Tommy found her voice at this juncture and raised it in a piercing scream. A moment later a blanket was twisted about her head and she was flung into a corner, clawing and kicking. Margery cowered at one side of the tent, too frightened to move.

Just then a new note was sounded. From behind the tent rose a shrill cry in a voice unfamiliar to either the girls or to the thieving tramps, a voice that caused the tramps to release their prisoners and turn to face the owner of the voice prepared for trouble.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE QUEEN TAKES A HAND

A STRANGE figure stepped into the light of the campfire. It was the figure of an old woman, bent with age. Her face was yellow and wrinkled, her eyes, black and piercing. She hobbled a few steps toward them, using a long stick as though for support.

"Out with you, villians!" she screamed, brandishing the stick threateningly. "My curses be upon your vile heads! Rob, would you? You shall burn in the fire from the

clouds," she hissed, pointing to the spokesman. "And you," pointing to another, "shall wither in the pit with the iron doors, where all evil doers shall come sooner or later. You shall perish as you deserve. Sybarina says it. So it shall be. Out with you!"

"It's the Gipsy Queen," screamed Hazel.

For a moment the tramps stood utterly dumbfounded. They realized that the old Gipsy was laying a curse upon them. More or less superstitious, they stood in considerable awe of Sybarina and her supposedly supernatural powers. The tramp who had pinioned Harriet's arms behind her back involuntarily relaxed his hold. Harriet made a dash for freedom. In an instant her captor was at her heels.

"Don't pay any attention to that old lunatic," he shouted to his companions. "She can't hurt you. Get the stuff and be quick about it."

But he had reckoned without his host. Raising her head, Sybarina sent a long shrill call echoing across the fields. Even in the excitement of the moment Harriet realized that it was a signal. A second later the call was answered.

"Skip!" warned the leader of the tramps. "It's Gipsies. We'll have the whole lot to fight if we don't light out!"

At this juncture five dark swarthy men came running across the fields. With one accord the

tramps took to their heels. The Gipsies started in pursuit of them, but the tramps had a lead of several yards and fear lending wings to their feet, they soon outdistanced their pursuers who finally abandoned the chase and returned to where Sybarina stood, surrounded by the Meadow-Brook Girls and their guardian.

Harriet sprang eagerly forward to thank their rescuers, but Sybarina waved her aside. Turning to the Gipsy men she spoke a few sharp words in the Romany tongue. The men nodded, talked among themselves for a moment then turned and strolled off in the direction whence they had come.

"Oh, Sybarina!" cried Harriet disappointedly. "Why didn't you let me thank them for chasing those tramps away?"

"I, their queen, have commended them. That is sufficient," returned Sybarina proudly. "They need no thanks for obeying my commands."

"Then we must thank you doubly," smiled Harriet, holding out her hand to the old Gipsy. "What would we have done if you had not been near?"

"It is well," replied Sybarina earnestly, taking Harriet's hand in both of hers. "But you must come with Sybarina. You must not stay here alone this night. The bad men will return

again. But Sybarina's men will stay here and watch for them. You and your kind friends will go with Sybarina to her camp."

"But how did you happen to find us?" questioned Miss Elting.

"Sybarina has eyes. Did those eyes not see the patteran (trail of grass)? Did she not read the message of the patteran that all of her tribe know? Where did you learn to make the patteran that leads the Gipsy toward the land where the sun goes down?"

"She means the grass that we dropped in the road," explained Harriet.

The old woman nodded.

"The patteran," she reiterated.

"Why," laughed Harriet. "We did that so that our friend Jane McCarthy would know where we had gone."

"Then there is Romany in your blood. None but the people of the Romany would think of such a thing. Where is the other princess?" questioned the queen, glancing about.

"Miss McCarthy has gone to meet her father," Miss Elting informed the old woman. "But we have not thanked you enough for the great service that you have done us."

"It is nothing. Did not the princess save Sybarina's miserable life? The debt is still unpaid. Many summers will come, and many

summers will go, ere the debt is paid. Sybarina never will live to pay it. Her people will remember. The Romany has a long memory, princess. Come, pretty ladies, come to the camp of the Gipsy. It is not good that you should stay the night here. To-morrow night, yes, but not this night."

"What do you say, girls?" questioned Miss Elting.

"Spend a night in a Gipsy camp?" asked Harriet.

"Yes."

"I think that would be fine."

"But, Sybarina, what of our own camp? Will not the men return and rob us?"

"I have told you. Sybarina's people will be on guard. You need have no fear. And when the princess with the fair hair returns, she shall be led to the Gipsy camp. Come."

"Wait please, until we fix our camp and leave a message for Miss McCarthy," said Miss Elting.

So excited were the Meadow-Brook Girls at the prospect of spending a night in a Gipsy camp that they almost forgot the thrilling experiences through which they had passed. There were few preparations to be made. Miss Elting pocketed her revolver, though she had no idea that she would need it. She knew that

the old Gipsy woman might be trusted; that a Gipsy never forgets a favor—nor a wrong. Sybarina felt under deep obligations to them for what they had done for her. By inviting them to her camp she was conferring upon them the highest possible mark of her regard, as the guardian who knew something of the wandering tribes of Gipsies was well aware.

The camp was some little distance from where the Meadow-Brook tent was pitched. A note for Jane was pinned to the tent flap on the same spot where she had pinned hers; then the party set out through the darkness. Not a man of the tribe was to be seen. The guardian asked no questions. She knew that Sybarina's word was law and that keen eyes were upon the Meadow-Brook camp, that no marauders would be permitted to enter there that night. Sybarina led the way as if it were a familiar path, calling out now and then to warn the travelers of a root or a stone that lay unseen in the path they were following. How she was aware of the presence of the obstacles the girls could not imagine.

They came in sight of the dull glow of the Gipsy campfire after a quarter of an hour's walking. Then as they stepped into the circle of light, many inquiring eyes were fixed upon them. There were dark-eyed, olive-complex-

ioned women of various ages, children clad in bright colors, some sitting under wagons eating bread and butter, others peering from the gaudily painted wagons, and still others lying asleep upon the ground just outside the circle. Horses might have been heard munching at the foliage out in the bushes, occasionally neighing or stamping. The fire crackled merrily. It was a bright but unfamiliar scene to the Meadow-Brook Girls.

Tommy and Margery were a trifle apprehensive.

"Where are we going to thleep?" questioned Tommy cautiously.

"I don't know, dear," returned Miss Elting. "Sybarina will provide a place when the time comes. We have our own blankets. I think we may sleep out of doors if we wish to do so. But we have a long evening before us yet. It is your opportunity to learn something of the life and habits of the Gipsies."

"Thay, Mith Elting do—do you think it thafe to thtay here?" questioned Tommy.

"Perfectly so. Much more so than in our own camp this evening."

Sybarina was brewing the tea with her own hands. Miss Elting stepped over to her.

"May I assist you?" she asked.

The Gipsy queen shook her head.

"Sybarina will make the tea for her friends, her good friends, the pretty ladies. Sybarina will have other guests this evening."

"Oh, will you?" questioned the guardian, in a surprised tone.

"Yes. Pretty ladies will come to cross the Gipsy's palm with silver. Sybarina will read the future and the past for them. Sybarina will read your future too, but you and your friends need not cross her palm with silver. Sybarina is your friend."

Harriet had been an interested listener to the brief dialogue. She drew a little closer.

"I should like to learn to read the past and future, Sybarina. Will you teach me?" asked Harriet.

The old woman fixed her piercing eyes upon the eager face before her.

"The princess shall be taught to read the future this very night. The stars have said it."

"I'm afraid I never could learn to read palms in one night," laughed Harriet.

"The stars and the voices of the air will help you. Be not afraid. But you must be a Gipsy true."

"How do you mean?"

"You must be like other Gipsies."

"Oh! You mean dress like them?"

"Yes. After the tea you shall see."

Tea was a most formal affair. Sybarina first took a sip from her own cup then passed the cup to the others, each girl taking a sip in turn, after which cups were served to each member of the party. By this time the other members of the tribe appeared to have lost interest in the visitors.

"My girls would know something of your people, Sybarina," suggested Miss Elting after the formalities of the tea drinking had been finished and the girls had settled down to their own cups of tea.

She regarded her teacup frowningly, as though she were seeking light in the amber fluid.

"My daughters," said the old woman. "It takes many years to earn the confidence of a Romany. You have done so in a hour. All are Gorgios to the Gipsy."

"What ith a Gorgio?" piped Tommy.

"Any one not Romany is a Gorgio. Forever has the Gorgio hounded the Gipsy. The Gorgio thinks the Gipsy a thief, but the Gipsy is not a thief. The Gipsy has little history, my daughters, but the Gipsy dates back to antiquity, to the famed Kings of Egypt. He keeps his sacred tongue—the Romany. It is his secret language. Through it he can hold converse with the Romanys of the world. Ages and ages ago, the Romany was called a Jat. That was in

far off India. Then came a bad king from Persia who stole ten thousand of them to make music for him. There they remained until nine hundred years after the Son of Man came, when they were taken captive again and held in bondage until at last they separated and journeyed to the far places of the world. To-day the Gipsy is the only free man who wanders the earth. He pays no tithes, he has no cares."

"But you have a ruler, a head of all the Gipsies, have you not?" interjected Miss Elting.

"There is the queen of all," answered the old woman softly. "She now is one hundred years old. She lives in Roumania. Each year are her commands received by all her peoples throughout the world. How, I cannot tell you. It is a secret of the Romanys. We love, we hate, but not as do the Gorgios. But see! The princess has returned. She seeks her friends."

"You—you mean Miss McCarthy?" questioned Harriet.

The Gipsy nodded gravely.

"Good grathiouth," exclaimed Tommy. "Thhe'th got eyeth in the top of her head. How doeth thhe know that Jane hath come back?"

"I read the message in the teacup," answered Sybarina. "It is time, fair daughter to begin, if you would read the secrets of the stars. Come with me and you shall be prepared."

Harriet rose and followed the old woman to one of the gaudily painted wagons, without the slightest hesitancy.

CHAPTER XIX

DELVING INTO THE MYSTERIES

"OH, good gracious! Where are they?" cried Crazy Jane, as she walked into the Gipsy camp.

The girls glanced at each other wonderingly. Had not the Gipsy queen just told them that Jane had arrived at the Meadow-Brook camp? The mystery was too great for them to solve.

"But darlin's, what does it mean? The Gipsy girl who came for me, said you were staying here for the night."

"We have been invited to be the guests of the tribe for this night, Jane. Sybarina is the queen of these Gipsies, you know. She is the one we rescued from the burning barn."

"Of course. Why are you here?"

The guardian explained how they had been attacked by tramps and how the Gipsy woman and her companions had come to their rescue.

Jane was amazed, then her face flushed with anger. She wanted to know if the Tramp Club had been seen. Miss Elting said they had not.

"But where is my darlin' Harriet?" questioned Jane, gazing at her inquiringly.

"She has gone with the queen into one of the wagons. You will see her soon."

"Won't it be jolly, Jane, to spend a night in a Gipsy camp?" cried Hazel.

"Well, that depends. I've heard the tribes weren't overly clean."

"Sh-h-h!" warned Miss Elting. "You mustn't say such things here. Remember we are guests."

"I'm not likely to forget it. Oh, look at that pretty Gipsy girl! What a beauty!" cried Jane delightedly.

The Gipsy girl who had emerged from one of the wagons was indeed pretty. Her hands were demurely folded, her head lowered, and her eyes veiled by drooping lashes, as she moved slowly toward the group. She came to a halt directly in front of Crazy Jane.

"Cross my palm with silver and I'll read your past and your future," invited the pretty Gipsy girl.

Crazy Jane leaned forward regarding the Gipsy girl with keen, searching eyes.

"Indeed I will. Yes, darlin', you can read my future and my past. How much silver shall I cross your palm with?"

"What you will, pretty lady."

Jane placed a shining fifty cent piece on the open palm. Something about the palm appeared to interest her very much. Just at this juncture, the Gipsy girl chanced to look up. The eyes of the two girls met. Jane uttered a whoop and embraced the girl in a bearlike hug.

"If it isn't my own darlin' Harriet," she cried. "But who would have thought it. Hurrah for Harriet, the Gipsy!"

"Ah, daughter, she is the true Romany," interrupted Sybarina, suddenly appearing behind Harriet. "None but a true daughter of Romany could have said those words so well." The old woman's eyes gleamed with pride. Then she exclaimed: "I see strangers coming to the camp of the Gipsy! Would you have them see you, or would you watch them from the wagons?"

"From the wagons," chorused the girls.

"The Romany princess, she of the brown eyes, may wander at will. The strangers will not think her a Gorgio. She is a true Romany."

"Thank you, Sybarina, I will go with my friends. Perhaps I may come out later," answered Harriet. She was dressed in Gipsy costume, and her face, already dark, had been slightly stained with herbs which the old woman had rubbed on both her face and hands.

The young men and women from nearby

farms began to stroll into the camp to have their fortunes told. With them came several keen-eyed farmers, leading horses which they had brought in for a chance at a trade. The Gipsy men quickly gathered about the animals, then began the incessant talk of the horse trader, the Gipsies being particularly shrewd in that line of business. In the meantime Sybarina and several other women of the tribe were reading the futures of the giggling country girls. It was all very interesting to the girls in the nearby wagon. They were peering out from the darkened interior, unseen. Never before had they experienced anything so romantic or so picturesque.

Harriet finally wandered out into the field. She attracted attention only because of her slender figure and pretty face. She had no fear of being recognized, for no one there ever had seen her before.

"Isn't she a typical Gipsy, though?" chuckled Jane, gazing admiringly at Harriet.

"Unless one knew she were not, one couldn't tell the difference," answered Miss Elting. "Just look at that girl for whom the queen is telling a fortune. See how eagerly she drinks in every word. Every word is true to her. She believes it all."

"So does Sybarina," replied Hazel.

"Yes, I think she does. Do you know, Jane, she told us when you arrived at the tent. I think it must have been at the moment when you reached there. I can't imagine how she knew."

"Maybe she heard the car," suggested Margery.

"No she didn't," declared Jane. "I drove into the camp without making a sound. I wanted to give you a surprise. I wonder how she knew I was near."

Neither Jane nor any of her companions had thought of the big headlights on the car, the glint of which had flashed on the foliage of a tree near the gipsy camp just as Jane was swinging into the byway that led down to the Meadow-Brook camp. Perhaps the old gipsy's keen eyes had caught this flash and read it aright. But this the girls were never to know. Their attention, just now, was attracted by the sound of loud talking. Voices were heard approaching the camp.

"I guess we are going to have quite a party this evening," said Harriet, stepping into the wagon. "Oh, this is simply great! What a pity we aren't all made up to look like Gipsies."

"Look, girls!" exclaimed the guardian.

They did look, with widening eyes.

"My grathiouth, if it ithn't thothe Tramp boyth," breathed Tommy.

"It certainly is the Tramp Club. There's Captain Baker and Sammy and Dill and Davy. Where could they have come from?" wondered Hazel.

"Oh, let's go out and call to them," suggested Margery enthusiastically.

"Wait," warned Harriet. "I have a plan that I think will work to perfection. If it does, we'll have some fun with the Tramp Club this evening."

"What is it, darlin'?"

Harriet whispered in Jane's ear. Crazy Jane uttered a loud laugh.

"Sh-h-h!" warned the guardian. "You will betray our hiding place to those boys."

"I must get word to Sybarina. I wish she would come over here," mused Harriet.

As though in answer to her wish, Sybarina rose and hobbled toward the wagon. She halted at the step without looking up.

"The friends of the pretty ladies are here. What do the pretty ladies wish to do?"

"Oh, Sybarina! I want to read the future for that boy yonder on the right, the one with the reddish hair. May I? Please let me."

"It shall be as the Romany girl wishes, but she must be grave, she must not make her real self known to the laughing boy."

"No, no, no! I promise not to betray my

identity. But what shall I say? I don't know what to say," begged Harriet.

"The words will come unbidden to the lips of the Romany girl. Fear not. Come." There was a suspicion of a twinkle in the piercing black eyes as Sybarina stretched forth her hand to Harriet Burrell. Harriet's heart thumped violently as she stepped down from the wagon. "If I get a chance to read George Baker's palm I will make him stand as near to the wagon as possible, so you girls can hear what I say to him, but don't you dare make a sound."

"Isn't she the clever darlin'?" chuckled Crazy Jane.

"Harriet is a very resourceful girl," answered Hazel admiringly.

"Yes; Harriet has added a good many honor beads to her string during this hike," replied the guardian. "I think, too, that she is going to pay those boys the debt that we owe them."

"Listen!" commanded Jane. Sybarina was speaking.

"Behold before you the Star of the East. Behold one who has come out of the East to read the future true. Cross her palm with silver and the Oracle will speak, revealing the past and foretelling the future."

The Gipsy queen had not led Harriet into the bright light. Instead the girl, in the fainter

"Here, young woman, read my palm."

light at the outer edge of the circle, stood with downcast eyes, hands folded before her.

"Who shall be the first to hear the future and the past from the Star of the East?"

"Say, fellows, now is the time to find out a few things," laughed Captain George Baker. "Here's where I consult the Star of the East. Here, young woman, read my palm. I don't know anything about this fortune-telling business, and I don't believe in it, but I'm willing to take a chance on it. How much does it cost to consult the stars?"

"For a silver quarter I will reveal the past only. Cross my hand with a silver dollar and both the past and future shall be as an open book," answered Harriet, speaking in a low tone, disguising her voice as much as possible.

George uttered a low whistle.

"A dollar! Whew! Isn't that pretty high?"

"The stars are higher," was the curt reply of the Star of the East.

There was an audible giggle from the interior of the nearby wagon. Harriet heard it, but Captain Baker was too much interested in the prospect of having his fortune told to give heed to the sound.

"Isn't she the clever darlin'?" reiterated Crazy Jane, restraining herself from shouting only by a great effort of will.

"All right. Here's your money. But, mind you, I'll expect a lot of information for a dollar."

"The past and future are not measured by silver," retorted Harriet. "That which is past the Oracle has revealed to me. That which is to be, I alone can tell. I am but the mouthpiece of the Oracle, but the Oracle cannot lie."

"I'm glad to be assured of hearing the truth, at any rate," replied George flippantly.

"Be at rest. You shall hear the truth," promised the Star of the East dryly. Then taking George's hand in hers she gravely scrutinized the lines of his palm.

"The lines of your hand tell me many things," she began.

"Then be sure that you tell me all about them. I want my money's worth," urged the captain.

"The past and future shall be fully revealed to you," promised the supposed Gipsy. Captain George Baker of the Tramp Club then listened to a fortune that, though it did not wholly please, amazed him beyond measure.

CHAPTER XX

GETTING EVEN WITH GEORGE

"YOUR hand tells me that you travel not alone," continued Harriet. "Other youths are with you. Together you have journeyed for many days along the highway."

"Well? That's nothing. Anybody could see that," jeered George.

"If you would listen to the word of the Oracle, be silent. On your journey, maidens have crossed your path. They, too, are wayfarers along the trail. You have held out the hand of fellowship to them, but your friendship is false and your hearts are full of guile."

"That's just where you're wrong," interrupted George. "Those girls are all right and we like them a lot. I'd like to know how you know so much about them."

"The Gypsy knows many things," replied Harriet enigmatically. "Your hand reveals to her the grievous wrong you have done these trusting maidens."

"Oh, that's not so," contradicted George.

"None can deceive the Oracle," was the stern answer. "I see here a camp. The campfire

burns brightly. About it sit the maidens. Look! Six youths approach. With them they bear a sack filled with the melons of the field. The maidens welcome them with smiles and pleasant words. They little know whence came these melons. They little know that before them lies the bitter fruit of lawless thievery."

"Oh, that's putting it altogether too strong," expostulated George. "How can you tell anything about where those melons came from by the lines of my hand?"

"To the Prophet of the Oracle all things are plain," replied the Star of the East. "In the early darkness of the night, ere the moon rose, the evildoers stole forth and robbed the farmer of his melons."

"This is becoming too personal," gasped George, mopping his forehead.

"Word was brought to the farmer of this wicked deed and he hurried forth to catch the thieves," continued Harriet. "Long did he search for them. Then seeing the camp of the maidens he approached, and finding them innocently eating his melons, he poured forth the vials of his wrath upon their defenseless heads. He branded them as thieves and demanded settlement. They crossed the farmer's palm with much silver to pay for the stolen melons. They were too noble to betray the real thieves."

Captain George shifted uneasily. "That's really too bad. I'm sorry they got into such a mess," he muttered. "I wonder what they think of us."

"Their hearts are filled with shame and sorrow at the deceitfulness of those whom they supposed were their friends."

"But—but the boys didn't intend to make trouble for the girls," protested the captain. "They thought it would be great fun to forage for melons, and at the same time to give the girls a treat."

The supposed gipsy shook her head slowly.

"It makes no difference what they thought. The deed is done. There is only one way in which the wrong can be righted."

"How can these boys square themselves with the girls?" questioned George eagerly.

"I will consult the Oracle." The Gipsy girl stood with head bent as though in deep thought. Then she said solemnly: "If the wicked boys will go to those whom they have so cruelly wronged and ask pardon for their unmanly behavior perhaps forgiveness may be theirs."

"I—I guess I'd better," returned George earnestly. At this juncture a smothered giggle from the darkened Gipsy wagon came near breaking up the seance. He glanced up suspiciously. Harriet's face was grave.

"You have chosen wisely. Will you obey the command of the Oracle?"

"Oh, ye—es. I'll apologize. I'll do it. It's wonderful. I never thought there was so much to fortune telling."

"There is more to it than you dream," answered Harriet Burrell, and with much truth on her side. There was indeed more to it than Captain George Baker dreamed. In the Gipsy wagon four girls and their guardian were making desperate efforts to control their laughter that the sounds of their merriment might not be heard by the young man outside.

"Can you answer any question I ask you?" queried George, after thinking deeply.

"The Oracle knows all things, if it will but speak," answered the Gipsy girl, leaving an avenue of escape if he should ask her something that she was unable to answer.

"Where are the girls now?"

"They are near at hand. Would you see them?"

"No, no. Not to-night," hastily interposed Captain Baker. "What I wish to know is where they are."

"You would know if they have outwitted you in the race?"

"Yes, yes. But how do you know what I am thinking about?"

"The mouthpiece of the Oracle knows all things," crooned the fortune teller. "No, they have not yet won the race. You shall see them on the morrow."

"Where? Tell me where?"

"A short span of twelve miles hence there is a spring. The spring is known as Granite Spring."

"Yes, yes? Will they be there?" he asked eagerly.

"No, not there," replied the Gipsy. "But you will find them near at hand. Seek and you shall find, but go with humble spirit, else disaster may overtake you."

"Thank you, I'll do as you say. This is wonderful. I want my friends to have their fortunes told by you. You are the right kind. I wonder if you can tell me just what these girls are going to do to get ahead of us in the race."

"I will consult the Oracle once more," replied the fortune teller.

It was fully two minutes before Harriet raised her head. George stood eagerly awaiting her answer.

"The Oracle knows but will not say," replied Harriet coldly. "The Oracle is ever fair and just. It will not reveal the plans of the maidens to their enemies. The Star of the East is weary. She cannot read the palms of your friends.

Your way lies yonder. Your companions await you."

Captain George, very red of face, a sheepish expression in his eyes, got up hastily and walked over to his companions who were sitting on the ground awaiting him.

"Come on, fellows. Let's get out of here. This place gives me the creeps."

"You seemed mighty interested in what that Gipsy girl had to say. Did she tell you anything remarkable?" asked Dill laughingly.

"Did she? I should say she did."

"Then you did better than the rest of us. That other young Gipsy woman didn't tell me a single thing."

"The old Gipsy woman gave it to me red hot!" exclaimed Sam. "She told me some things I'd just as soon not have heard. She said I was started on the road to thievery. Now what do you think of that?"

"That's nothing," replied George. "The young one told me all about it."

"About what?" questioned Davy.

"That melon business."

"You don't mean it?"

"Yes, I do. She told me about the whole affair."

"Well, what do you think of that?" wondered Fred.

"I didn't think much of it."

"How do you suppose she found out about it?"

"Don't ask me," replied George gloomily. "She said that the Oracle told her."

"You don't believe such nonsense as that, do you?" asked Davy.

"I don't know what to think about it. Gipsies are queer folks. They're too mysterious to suit me. I've got all I want of them. They know too much," declared the captain. "Why, they can read one's thoughts."

In the meantime, Harriet gleefully watched the departure of the boys from the camp. There was laughter in her eyes. She turned to the wagon where her companions were now giving expression to uncontrolled merriment. Few visitors remained in the camp, and these were some distance away.

"Well, I think I have evened up matters with that young man," declared Harriet. "What do you say, girls?" she asked, thrusting a laughing face into the wagon.

"Oh, Harriet!" gasped Miss Elting. "It was the funniest thing I ever heard. And he believed every word of it."

"Why shouldn't he? It was the truth. By the way, Miss Elting—I have collected one dollar of that four dollars and eighty cents that

you paid for the melons," said Harriet, extending a hand in the palm of which lay Captain Baker's silver dollar.

"Oh, no, no," protested the guardian, drawing back. "I could not think of accepting the money."

"Why not? I can collect the whole amount in a very short time at this rate," laughed Harriet.

"Oh, darlin'! What a girl, what a girl!" laughed Crazy Jane.

"No. You must not keep it. It does not rightfully belong to you."

"Then if you refuse to accept the money I shall give it to Sybarina. She'll take it. Trust a Gipsy to take everything that is offered."

Sybarina graciously accepted the money. Her eyes shone as she hobbled over to Harriet Burrell and exclaimed earnestly: "I said you were the true Romany. Now I know it. Did I not tell you the power to foretell both the past and future would come to you unbidden?"

"Yes," laughed Harriet, "but I happened to know considerable about the Tramp Club's affairs particularly since they visited a certain melon patch. Is there any danger of those boys returning to-night?"

Sybarina shook her head. "They have returned to their camp."

"Where are they camping?"

"On yonder hillside. Even now you can catch the glow of their campfire. But you shall see them again and you shall make them red of face for the trick which they played on you and your friends, my Romany girls. You would outwit them?"

"We are trying to get home ahead of them?"

The old woman nodded.

"The way shall be made clear to you. Sybarina will tell the Romany girl how to defeat her rivals, to show them that the Romany tribes know the secret bypaths as the birds know the trail to the sunny land when the frost is in the air. Come, child. Come, sit by the fire, while Sybarina tells you that which shall make the way clear."

CHAPTER XXI

HARRIET PLANS TO OUTWIT THE TRAMP CLUB

A LONG conversation was held between Harriet and the Gipsy queen, the latter drawing a map on the ground with a willow wand to show the girl the route that she was to travel after the Meadow-Brook Girls had gone on for another day.

Harriet's eyes were sparkling. She thought

she saw a way to outwit the Tramp Club. Harriet was chuckling gleefully when she joined her companions. She declined to tell them that night, however, just what the Gipsy had communicated to her.

"Where shall we sleep to-night?" asked Miss Elting.

"Sybarina says we may have the wagon to sleep in," answered Harriet. "Shall we use it?"

"No. I think I prefer to sleep in the open," answered the guardian. "It is not a cool night. Suppose we roll up in our blankets and sleep by the campfire? What do you say, girls?"

"I thay yeth," spoke up Tommy. "I'll put my feet againtht the fire; then I won't have cold feet any more."

They were sound asleep in a few moments after turning in. Even the Gipsy dogs that had been barking most of the evening, and the crying babies, to whom none of the tribe had given the slightest heed, were now quietly asleep. Sybarina watched her guests roll up in their blankets and nodded approvingly.

"The true Romany," she muttered. For a long time the old woman sat by the fire, sat until the embers fell together and the sticks began to blacken, when she rose and peered into each sleeping face of the Meadow-Brook Girls. Sy-

barina then hobbled to her own wagon and disappeared within.

The Meadow-Brook Girls awakened next morning with the sun in their eyes. Miss Elting sat up and called softly to Harriet. The guardian and Harriet rubbed their eyes and blinked dazedly about them. There was something strange about their surroundings, but just what that strangeness was they for the moment did not know. All at once they discovered what had happened. They were absolutely alone, save for their sleeping companions.

"Why, they've gone!" cried Harriet.

"Gone and we never woke up," laughed Miss Elting. "How strange."

"Who hath gone?" mumbled Tommy, sitting up.

"The Gipsies," answered Harriet.

"They must have left in a great hurry, for some reason," suggested the guardian. "I don't understand it. Nor do I understand how they managed to slip away so quietly."

The wagon tracks were plainly outlined in the soft earth and the remnants of the campfire were there, but that was all. Yet it was not all. As Harriet sought to draw on her shoe she felt something hard in the toe. Groping in the shoe with her fingers she drew forth a tightly wrapped paper. Opening this she found a tiny

brass triangle. On it were crudely cut several strange characters.

"How curious," breathed Harriet. "But how did it get in my shoe?" she wondered.

"Look on the wrapping paper," suggested Miss Elting.

Harriet did so. As she looked the puzzled expression on her face gave place to a smile.

"It is from Sybarina," she exclaimed. "This is what she writes: 'A charm for the Romany girl. No harm shall come to her who wears it. Happiness and prosperity shall be hers forever and always. It is the Gipsy good luck charm. Who knows but that, some day, you may wear it as a queen? Farewell until we meet again.'"

"How strange!" murmured Harriet, holding up the trinket that her companions might see.

"I wonder if it ith a charm againtht bullth?" piped Tommy.

"I would suggest, girls, that we return to our own camp. It may not be there by this time."

Upon reaching their own camp they were much relieved to find everything as it should be. Nothing had been disturbed. But, ere they had finished their breakfast, three farmers came striding in to know if anything had been seen of the Gipsies.

"They left early this morning," answered Miss Elting. "Why?"

"Wal, nothing only one of them traded off on me a ring-boned, spavined old hoss, which he said was sound. I'll catch them when they come this way again."

"I think I understand why the Gipsies took such an early departure," said Harriet after the men had gone. "But I do not believe Sybarina had anything to do with such dishonest dealing."

The day's route was laid out after breakfast. The boys undoubtedly had gone on, for nothing was to be seen of their campfire. Miss Elting rather thought they would see no more of the Tramp Club after the fortune-telling that Harriet had given the chief the night before. But with the route that Sybarina had laid out for the girls, the guardian believed they could make some time and gain the advantage over the boys.

Camp was hurriedly struck after breakfast. Their route that day lay across lots and their camping place was to be on the edge of a forest easily accessible to Jane with her motor car. Using government maps, as they were doing, they were able to locate every little rise of ground, every hollow and almost every clump of bushes along their way. These government maps Miss Elting had purchased at a comparatively small cost, as any one may do. They are very useful to one who is taking a tramp

through the country, and the Meadow-Brook Girls found them so.

Jane accompanied her companions out to the highway and followed along behind them in her car for the first mile. Then their ways parted, the tramping girls to climb a hill, Crazy Jane to follow the highway on to the point where she too was to leave the road and make camp for them. But there was always a long wait for Jane, so the girl occupied the time in driving to the nearest village to make a number of purchases at the stores.

CHAPTER XXII

A COMBIETTA CONCERT

HER shopping done Jane lost no time in cranking up her car, hopped in and with a wave of her hand swung down the road and went honking through the village on the way to the place chosen for the Meadow-Brook Girls' camp for that night. Jane had avoided all questions about herself and her party, except to say that they were camping. The girl did not propose to leave a trail for the Tramp Club if she could avoid it. As the girls were nearing the end of their journey it behooved them to cloak their movements with

secrecy if they hoped to outwit their young rivals and win the race, which they were determined to do.

Jane had pitched the tent just within the edge of the woods and had started a small cook-fire when the welcome "hoo-e-e-e" of the Meadow-Brook Girls first reached her ears. She ran out into the open waving her apron and shouting a welcome.

"There she is," cried Margery.

"Dear old Jane!" exclaimed Hazel. "She has gotten everything ready for us and started a fire."

"I propose three cheers for Jane McCarthy," cried Harriet. The cheers were given in the shrillest tones of the Meadow-Brook Girls. Jane bowed in exaggerated fashion at this ovation.

"Have you seen the boys to-day, Jane?" was Harriet's first question.

"Not a sign of them, the rascals," replied Jane.

"I imagine that they are at Granite Spring, half a dozen miles back," laughed Harriet.

"What makes you think so?" asked Hazel.

"Because, when I read Captain Baker's fortune, I told him that our next camping place was to be not far from that place. He will make straight for Granite Spring, you see if he doesn't."

"Then I don't think we'll see the lads again this trip," concluded Jane. "But, girls, you've got to get busy if you hope to win this contest. Three more days of hiking will bring you to Meadow-Brook. If the boys once get ahead of you, you can't expect to catch up with them and win in that length of time."

"We simply must win, Jane," returned Harriet determinedly.

"Then you'd better begin to think about how you're going to do it," advised Jane dryly.

"Jane is right," agreed the guardian. "We must plan to-night. And I think we shall have to put in one big day's walk, perhaps more than that. I should first like to know where the boys are. Jane will you make an effort to locate them to-morrow?"

"Yes, indeed, Miss Elting."

"When we have definite information on that point we ought to be able to map out a plan of campaign that will win the contest for us. I believe we have gotten ahead of them now and that we shall be able to keep our lead."

"Of course we are going to win," reiterated Harriet Burrell.

"If it is all settled that we are to win the race, I propose that we celebrate to-night," suggested Jane.

"How?" asked Margery.

"I've got a bag of fruit in the car. We'll make fruit lemonade, then we'll have a combietta concert."

"What ith a combietta conthert?" interrupted Tommy curiously.

"Wait and see," teased Jane.

"Now, Jane, be good and tell us about this combietta affair?" coaxed Hazel. "What is it?"

"An instrumental concert," giggled Jane. "I got the musical instruments when I was in town doing some shopping. Oh, don't worry, darlin's. You all know to to play them. The first thing to do is to decide upon the tune. How about the "Marching Through Georgia" for a starter?"

Jane spread out six squares of thin white paper. She then produced the same number of small packages.

"Oh, we'll wake the squirrels and the chipmunks and the weasles," promised Jane, with a grin of anticipation.

Tommy picked at the wrapping on the end of one of the small packages and uttered an exclamation of disappointment.

"It ithn't a musical inthrument at all," she declared indignantly. "It ith nothing but a common old black comb."

"That's just where you're wrong," answered

Jane. "These combs are new. I bought them in the village store this very day. Listen, dears. This is the combietta. It makes music through its teeth, and plays any tune you call for."

"Wonderful," laughed Miss Elting. "There is something very familiar about this marvelous musical instrument. Combietta, do you call it, Jane?"

"Sure I do. But the name is my own invention. The music is as old as the combs themselves and I don't know how old they are."

"I remember having made music with combs when I was a girl in short frocks," nodded the guardian. "Play, Jane, and show the girls how to make music."

Crazy Jane folded one of the square slips of paper over the teeth of one of the combs, then placed the comb's teeth between her own.

"Zu — zu — zu-zee-zee-zah," she breathed through paper and comb, which strange sounds were instantly interpreted by Jane's companions, as "Come Back to Erin."

Each girl with a cry of delight, now snatched up a comb, wrapped it in the thin paper and joined enthusiastically in the chorus of "Come Back to Erin." Tommy Thompson, fully as delighted as her companions, leaned against a tree making hideous noises on her comb; Miss

Elting, sitting on a stump, eyes fixed on the foliage far above her, was an enthusiastic performer in the combietta concert.

"Now, 'Marching Through Georgia,'" she cried.

"I can't play fast enough to play that," complained Buster.

"Then play anything you like," answered Harriet, with a merry laugh.

"Yes. Make a noise. You don't all have to play the same tune. This is a celebration," shouted Jane. "What we want is noise and lots of it to celebrate the victory we are going to win."

And noise there was, a perfect pandemonium of sounds, principally inharmonious.

A sudden, startling chorus of yells and a burst of music from the forest, brought the girls' concert to a sudden stop. Lights flashed from the bushes near at hand, whirling about them in giddy circles like great pinwheels. The Meadow-Brook Girls were surrounded by wildly yelling figures, strange flaring lights—and music.

"Indianth!" screamed Tommy. "We'll all be thcalped. Oh, thave me!" Then the little lisping girl ran like a frightened deer, for the protection of the Meadow-Brook Girls' tent.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE HARMONICA SERENADE

"OH, what is it?" wailed Margery.

No one was able to answer the question for the moment. It was a startling interruption. Even Harriet, though unafraid, could not make up her mind what was the meaning of the outbreak.

Now she saw what the lights were. They were flaring torches made from cat-tails. Then all at once she recalled that the Tramp Club boys played harmonicas. She had heard them play once before.

"Don't be afraid, girls. It is the boys," said Harriet in a relieved tone.

"The boys?" questioned Miss Elting. Then her face lighted up understandingly. "Oh the rascals!" she exclaimed.

The girls now that they knew no danger threatened them stood perfectly still, waiting for the concert to come to an end.

"You may come in, boys, when you have finished your concert," called the guardian. "We have enjoyed the serenade very much."

The music and shouting ceased abruptly. A moment later Captain Baker stepped into the

camp. His face was flushed, but there was a certain sheepishness about him that made Harriet Burrell's eyes twinkle.

"Why, Captain! We did not look for you this evening," greeted Miss Elting.

"Thought you had given us the slip, did you?" grinned George. "You'll have to get up earlier in the morning, to do that."

"Oh, won't you though!" chorused his companions trooping in after their captain.

"But how did you find us?" questioned Harriet.

"Easiest thing in the world. We followed Miss McCarthy's car tracks."

"Where to?" twinkled Jane.

"All over the country. You surely led us a fine chase. But we found you, just the same."

Tommy now ventured from the tent.

"Thay, you nearly thcared me to death," she chided. "What do you boyth want?"

"Why, Tommy, they came to serenade us," reproved Miss Elting. "We enjoyed the music very much," she said, turning toward the boys. "If you will sit down and play another selection, we will serve refreshments afterwards. Jane! Will you get the things ready?"

"Yes. But the boys don't deserve it. However, so long as we are going to win the race we can afford to treat them well," teased Jane.

The captain smiled a superior smile.

"We could have gone right on to the end of the route to-day without stopping, if we had wished to do so. But we didn't want to take an unfair advantage of you."

"Oh, no. You boys never do take an unfair advantage, do you?" chuckled Crazy Jane. Miss Elting gave her a warning glance. The captain did not observe it.

"Give them another tune, boys," George ordered.

"First please extinguish those cat-tail torches," requested Harriet. "You will set the woods on fire, if you are not careful. Everything is so dry now that a fire would start very easily."

The torches were ground out under foot, after which the Tramp Club played "Home Sweet Home" on the harmonicas. At a nod from the guardian the girls got out their combs and joined in the tune. The woodland inhabitants probably never had heard a concert like this. It sent the birds hopping from limb to limb in great alarm. Fortunately there were no neighbors near at hand, so only the inhabitants of the forest were disturbed.

Jane that day had purchased a large chocolate cake at a baker shop in the village. She brought this out then disappeared into the

tent, emerging a few minutes later with a pail of fruit lemonade, while Hazel, who had accompanied Jane, followed her, bearing cups and glasses. Miss Elting busied herself with cutting the cake and Harriet served the lemonade.

"Well, boys, here's to the candy we're going to have when we get to our journey's end," teased Jane McCarthy, raising her glass of lemonade.

"And here," returned the captain, raising his glass with a flourish, "is to those beautiful handkerchiefs that we're going to wear next to our hearts for years and years to come."

"To the stars that hold our future," teased Harriet.

The captain paused with the glass of lemonade in his hand. He glanced quickly at Harriet Burrell, but the innocent expression on her face told him nothing. Miss Elting saw that George had something on his mind. She suspected what it was. An amused smile played about the corners of the guardian's mouth. There was a smile in Harriet's eyes, too, as she caught and read the thought in the mind of Miss Elting.

After the cake and lemonade had been disposed of, the party of young people chatted for the better part of an hour. Captain Baker, however, appeared uneasy. Twice he essayed to speak then checked himself abruptly.

"It's coming now," whispered Harriet. "He's trying to think of a way to begin."

Miss Elting nodded.

"I have a confession to make," began the captain, in an embarrassed manner.

"A confession!" exclaimed Harriet in a surprised tone.

"Yes, I have. Oh, it isn't for myself alone, but for my friends as well," continued the captain doggedly. The other boys exhibited signs of uneasiness.

"What about, Mr. Baker?" asked the guardian sweetly.

"It is about those melons."

"But, my dear boy, you need not apologize for them. They were simply delicious. I can't tell you how much we enjoyed them." Miss Elting was making it as hard for George as possible.

"It—it isn't that. Oh, what's the use? I don't know how to say it. We hadn't any right to give you those melons, Miss Elting."

"No right? Please explain yourself, Mr. Baker."

"I'll tell you all about it. We took those melons from the farmer's field without leave. We didn't mean to play a mean trick on you, but we did. We didn't think the farmer would accuse you girls of stealing the melons. We're aw-

fully sorry he made such a fuss about it and that you had to pay for them. Will you please let us return to you the money that you paid him. It was our treat, you know."

"Hm-m-m! This is a serious matter," replied the guardian slowly. The girls sat with lowered heads so that the boys might not discover the laughter in their eyes. "I cannot accept the money for the melons. We had better consider the incident closed. It is very manly of you, however, to come and tell us about it. But what induced you to do so?"

"I gueth hith conthcience troubled him," suggested Tommy wisely.

"Yes, I think so. But there was something else," admitted the boy. "It wasn't wholly conscience. We didn't realize how very wrong it was until——"

"Until the Oracle told you," nodded Tommy.

"What!" exclaimed George. The eyes of the Tramp Club were fixed on Tommy. "What do you mean by that?"

Harriet got up and with crossed hands before her, chin lowered, eyelids half veiling her eyes, moved demurely toward the captain.

"Cross my palm with silver and the past and future shall be revealed to you," she mumbled.

George Baker gazed at her, with suspicious, puzzled eyes. All at once he sprang up.

"I know you now! I knew I had seen you before, but I couldn't place you. You were the Star of the East!"

"Yes," admitted Harriet.

"And thhe told your fortune," chuckled Tommy.

Margery and Hazel giggled. Crazy Jane exclaimed derisively:

"Oh, boys, boys! That's the time you got your deserts! We paid you back with interest!"

"It was a mean trick," flared George. "We never would have thought it of you. It was the meanest trick I ever heard of. I'm sorry I made a fool of myself by coming here and apologizing to you."

"Mr. Baker, don't lose your temper," begged Miss Elting scarcely able to control her voice for laughter. "We have evened our score so let's shake hands and be friends."

"No, thank you. I'm sorry to refuse, but you have made fools of us," retorted George angrily.

"Oh, no. That ith not pothible," piped Tommy.

"Come on, fellows. We will get out of here before they make us angry," urged Captain Baker, snatching up his hat and starting away.

"Please wait," begged Miss Elting.

George shook his head.

"What about our compact?" called Harriet.

"We're going on and win the race. We'll show you that you aren't such athletes as you think. At least you shan't make fools of us at that. Good night."

Captain Baker and his friends strode angrily from the camp. They did not so much as look back. Perhaps the boys were really not so angry as they pretended to be.

"It's too bad. I didn't think they would take it that way," cried Harriet. "I surely thought they would be able to take a joke. Well, what's done can't be undone. There's nothing more to be done except to go on and try to win the race."

Jane had disappeared. Where she had gone the girls did not know. It was some time before she returned and when she did she was excited. Her hair was awry and her face flushed.

"Jane, where have you been?" demanded the guardian.

"I've been scouting. Girls, those miserable boys are planning to play another trick on you. They're going to start to-night and go on without stopping until they get home. What shall we do?"

The girls gazed solemnly into each other's eyes.

"That seems to settle it," spoke up Margery finally. "Well, let them have the race. Who cares?"

"We all care," answered Harriet, springing to her feet. "We simply must win that race now. Everybody will laugh at us if we don't, and I just couldn't stand it to see those boys grinning triumphantly at us afterwards. I don't care so much about the others."

"What would you suggest, Harriet?" inquired Miss Elting.

"Suggest? Why, there is only one thing to suggest. Checkmate them at their own game. We'll start for Meadow-Brook this very night and we'll keep going until we get there. Are you with me, girls?"

"Yes!" shouted the girls.

CHAPTER XXIV

CONCLUSION

"NOT quite so fast, girls," warned Miss Elting.

They turned toward her questioningly. Their eyes were sparkling, their faces flushed.

"What would you suggest, Miss Elting?" asked Harriet.

"Remember, that, if we take the route suggested by the Gipsy, we shall have to travel some of the roughest country in the state. Are you equal to the hike?"

"Yes!"

"We shall have to walk all night and a good part of the day to-morrow, and even then the boys may win the contest. Are you willing to try it?"

"Yes!"

"Then we will make our plans and get started. According to my calculations, it will be a twenty mile hike to Meadow-Brook by the way we propose to go. The boys will have a good ten miles further to travel if they go by way of the road. But having better going they will naturally travel much faster than we. Listen! We must travel light, with nothing in our packs except just sufficient food to carry us through. Jane, you will have to spend the night at the nearest farm house and come back for the tent and supplies in the morning. I hardly believe any one will disturb them over night. You must go at once or the people of the house will have retired. Go quietly."

Ten minutes later Jane was on her way to the farm house in her car, undetected by the members of the Tramp Club.

"Now we will get ready at once. Let us be

certain that none of the boys are watching. I would suggest that you girls lie down for an hour or so, while Harriet and myself get the packs together."

Hazel obediently led the way into the tent, Margery and Tommy following.

"I can't thleep. I'm too exthited," protested Tommy. She and her companions did sleep however. They were allowed to rest for two hours. When they awakened Harriet informed them that the Tramp Club already had started. Half an hour later the girls themselves had taken the trail to Meadow-Brook.

The Pathfinders made straight for a blue range of mountains that stood out dark and forbidding in the bright moonlight. The girls were full of enthusiasm, and would have walked much faster had not their guardian insisted on their saving their strength for the more difficult traveling after they reached the hills.

It was three o'clock in the morning when finally they dropped down a sharp incline into the gloomy depths of a rocky canyon. A trickling stream flowed through the canyon and the walls stood high on either side, rising sheer for a hundred feet.

"You will have to wade, girls. But I think we are all sufficiently hardened so that we shall not suffer more than temporary discomfort

from getting our feet wet," said the guardian, with an encouraging smile.

The girls plunged into the brook without hesitation. The water was only ankle deep, but the stones on the bottom of the creek were moss-covered and slippery. Still, they made good progress, really traveling faster than before they had entered the canyon.

At daylight Miss Elting called a halt. She had chosen a place where a dry shelf of rock offered a resting place. The girls threw themselves down flat on their backs. There was no wood with which to build a fire, but Miss Elting produced a small alcohol stove from her pack and made coffee. This with biscuits they had brought proved very refreshing. The guardian did not permit them to remain on the shelf of rock for a long time fearing that their muscles might become stiffened. Then the journey was taken up again. So full of enthusiasm and determination were the Meadow-Brook Girls that not one of them offered a word of complaint; but when at two o'clock that afternoon, they emerged from the canyon into the open country, Tommy and Margery were limping a little.

Beyond in the haze of a distant valley lay Meadow-Brook. The girls eager to get to their journey's end pushed on again. After half an hour's walking, Miss Elting called a halt. She

shaded her eyes and gazed off to the west. A thin brown line was crawling slowly along the road.

"It's the boys!" cried Harriet.

"They're going to win," groaned Margery.

"They are not. We must run for it."

"Yes," agreed Miss Elting. "But don't get excited. Keep your lips tightly closed. Breathe through your nostrils and keep your shoulders well back. Don't keep yourselves rigid, but just trudge along with every muscle relaxed. They don't see us. Ready! Go!"

The girls crossed the field at a trot. It was a good two miles to the village. They ran slowly, but steadily. At the end of a mile the guardian again ordered a halt, directing the girls to lie down in the field flat on their backs. A few moments later they were up and off again. They saw the boys a long distance to the rear, still trudging doggedly along. And half an hour later the girls stepped from the field out into the road. They heard the chug of a motor car. It swept on and overtook them. It was Jane. She was howling like a wild Indian.

"They're coming! They're coming. Run for it!" she yelled.

By this time the boys had discovered the girls. They, too, began to run. The race was on in earnest. Never had those girls run and

stumbled and lurched along as they did that afternoon. The boys gained slowly. The girls were nearing home. Jane was leading the procession, standing up in her car, steering as she stood, setting the pace for the Meadow-Brook Girls. She was shouting and yelling to keep up their courage, but it was an almost killing pace that she was making for them.

The girls staggered over the line that marked the village limits.

"Home!" cried Miss Elting.

"We've won!" screamed Jane almost beside herself with joy.

The girls walked unsteadily to one side of the road and sat down gasping. They had won the race, but by a slender margin. The boys were still forging ahead, running at top speed. They had thrown away their packs and were racing into the village in light order. Five minutes later a crowd of weary, humiliated boys came hurrying up to where the girls sat. They were much more fatigued than were their opponents, besides which, they were chagrined beyond words.

"Did we win?" jeered Jane triumphantly.

"Yes. You won," admitted Captain Baker sourly. "I take off my hat to you." He suited the action to the word. "You beat us at our own game. I don't know how you did it, but

you did and that's all there is about it, and we aren't going to whine. We'll take our medicine. We're going to stay in town the rest of the day, and we'll see you later on. Good-bye until to-night."

The girls' weariness left them almost magically. They hopped into Jane's car and were swiftly whirled home. Later in the afternoon a box of marshmallows for each of the girls was delivered to Miss Elting. But the fun was not yet ended.

That night the Tramp Club and the Meadow-Brook Girls were the guests of Tommy Thompson's father and mother at dinner. Tommy's parents, as well as the parents of the other girls, were delighted with the splendid physical condition of their daughters. Before each girl's plate at the table that stretched the length of the big dining room, was a box of marshmallows, before each boy's plate a handkerchief.

The marshmallow boxes were tied with pink ribbon, the color chosen by the Meadow-Brook Girls for their organization.

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